



A M E R I C A N
COMIC BOOK
C H R O N I C L E S

THE 1970s
1970-1979



by JASON SACKS

Table of Contents

Introductory Note about the
Chronological Structure of
American Comic Book Chronicles 4

By Keith Dallas

Note on Comic Book Sales
and Circulation Data..... 5

By Keith Dallas

Introduction & Acknowledgements 6

By Jason Sacks

Chapter One: 1970
Experimentation & Elevation 8

By Jim Beard, Keith Dallas and Jason Sacks

Chapter Two: 1971
Cracking the Code 34

By Jim Beard, Keith Dallas and Jason Sacks

Chapter Three: 1972
The Paradigm Shifts 60

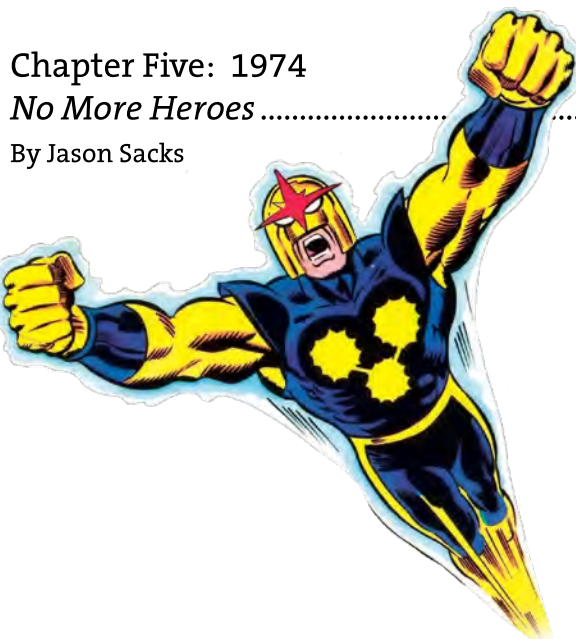
By Jason Sacks

Chapter Four: 1973
Innocence Lost..... 92

By Jason Sacks

Chapter Five: 1974
No More Heroes 124

By Jason Sacks



Chapter Six: 1975
The High Cost of Expansion..... 150

By Dave Dykema

Chapter Seven: 1976
Bicentennial Fireworks..... 178

By Dave Dykema

Chapter Eight: 1977
A Renewed Hope..... 204

By Dave Dykema

Chapter Nine: 1978
DC's Explosive Implosion 230

By Keith Dallas

Chapter Ten: 1979
Post-Implosion Malaise..... 254

By Jason Sacks

Works Cited..... 278

Index 286

1970s

CHAPTER ONE

Experimentation and Elevation

As the 1970s dawned, comics were on the brink of a transition. Old ways of creating comics seemed to be rapidly passing into history, while a new generation of mainstream and underground comics creators enthusiastically embraced an era of experimentation.

The 1960s were a fertile time in comic book history, but by the end of the decade, sales were slumping. The world outside the scripts, the art boards and the printing presses was changing by the minute. Comics' mostly sunny optimism starkly contrasted with the country's troubling times. The ongoing Vietnam War shadowed the nation, a struggle which galvanized many younger Americans in ways that the nation's older citizens may never have imagined two decades before.

Many of the ascendant Baby Boom generation rejected the world that their parents had created for them. Drugs such as marijuana and LSD were ubiquitous in some urban areas, while many people in that generation chose to renounce modern society in favor of their own culture of communes, head shops and underground comix and other media.

The Kids Are Alright

On May 4, 1970, four unarmed college students were slain by National Guardsmen during a protest rally on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio. The students were demonstrating against President Nixon's expansion of the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia. The massacre showed that the Nixon Administration's concern over youth and their increasingly strong ideals had reached a boiling point. Soon after the shooting, college campuses across America exploded in protest and over 100,000 students marched on Washington, D.C., to denounce the events in Ohio.

In the world of music, endings were prevalent, underscoring the fact that the 1960s were truly over. Rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix—who memorably performed the "Star Spangled Banner" at the Woodstock Festival just a year earlier—died suddenly in September from substance abuse at the age of 27. Female singing sensation Janis Joplin, another Woodstock veteran, died only two weeks after Hendrix, also at the age of 27 and also from a drug overdose. Reflecting one perception of the era, rock music had been growing darker since 1968 and the advent of the heavy metal genre, which was solidified with the arrival of the hard-edged Black Sabbath's 1970 self-titled debut album.

The Beatles, once spokespeople for an entire generation of the young and young-at-heart, called its quits in the decade's first year. DC Comics commented upon the then-recent controversy over the Fab Four in *Batman* #222 (June 1970), which told of the fictitious Oliver Twists musical group and a rumor that one of their members was dead. This story mirrored the real-life "Paul is Dead" legend surrounding Beatles bassist Paul McCartney. Interestingly, *Batman* #222 hit newsstands mere weeks after the announcement of the Beatles' break-up.

Music legend Elvis Presley, ironically concerned about the youth of 1970's interest in illicit drugs, dropped in on U.S. President Richard Nixon at the White House to express a few thoughts on the matter. In theaters across the country, *Woodstock* packed viewers in with its documentation of "three days of peace and love" at the famous "outdoor music festival" of 1969, which featured Joplin and Hendrix, among dozens of other performers. Films released in 1970 like *M*A*S*H*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Little Big Man* and *Zabriskie Point* also reflected the youth culture of the times.

All in all, youth and youth culture dominated the news in 1970. Comics reflected what was topical at the time. Baby Boomers were coming of age, and as they were doing in other fields and professions, they were taking over the comic book industry. Writers like Denny O'Neil, Gerry Conway and Mike Friedrich—much younger than most of their colleagues in the industry—brought a new enthusiasm into the medium's old characters and situations. While many of those creators had been comic book professionals for several years, they were finding greater acceptance among their peers as the decade began, and more writers joined their ranks. These writers were aided and abetted by youthful artists such as Neal Adams, Barry Smith and Jim Steranko who built upon the past with visual sensibilities that often shocked their older compatriots.

At the same time as a new generation of creators made its way into the mainstream comics medium, a whole other cohort of creators was

coming of age in the underground comic arena. Men and women such as Robert Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, Rand Holmes, Bobby London, Trina Robbins and Gilbert Shelton were finding expression for their more radical and open vision of the world in comics published by loosely organized companies with odd names like Rip Off Press, the Print Mint and Last Gasp Eco-Funnies.

State of the Industry

The December 14, 1970 edition of the financial publication *Barron's* assessed the fiscal state of the mainstream comic book industry: "This year, comic book publishers expect to sell about 300 million copies for roughly \$50 million, about the same as in 1960" (Beerbohm 83). Taking inflation into account, this news meant the entire industry had seen much better times. Sales continued to slip



This dynamic cover by Neal Adams for *Green Lantern* #76 heralded the arrival of *Green Arrow* and a bold new direction for the series. TM and © DC Comics.

TIMELINE: 1970

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

February 24: With *Green Lantern* #76, Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams begin their seminal run on the title.



April: The short-lived *Marvelmania* fan magazine debuts.



April 11: The Apollo 13 mission is disrupted when a ruptured oxygen tank cripples the spacecraft en route to the moon. Commander Jim Lovell transmits the soon-to-be immortal line, "Houston, we have a problem." The three astronauts on board safely return to Earth on April 17.



April 15: Underground publisher Last Gasp releases its first comic book, *Slow Death Funnies* #1, featuring stories by Robert Crumb and Kim Deitch, among others.



June 22: President Nixon signs the U.S. Constitution's 26th amendment, which lowers the voting age to 18.

May 4: At Kent State University, Ohio National Guardsmen fire upon students protesting the war in Vietnam. The gunfire kills four students and wounds nine others.

JANUARY

January 18: Jim Lawrence and Jorge Longeron's *Friday Foster* follows in the footsteps of Jackie Ormes' Torchy Brown as one of the first comic strips to star a black woman.



FEBRUARY

MARCH

March 6: A bomb, constructed by the leftist Weathermen movement, prematurely detonates, demolishing a New York City Greenwich Village townhouse and killing three Weathermen members.

APRIL

April 10: In a press release, musician Paul McCartney announces that the Beatles have disbanded.

MAY

April 28: Acting on orders from President Nixon, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops enter Cambodia in order to root out suspected Viet Cong strongholds. The invasion provokes anti-war protests across the nation.

April 22: Millions of Americans celebrate the first annual Earth Day as a way to express concerns about environmental problems.



JUNE

Green Lantern TM and © DC Comics. Black Bolt TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Conan TM and © CPI. Friday Foster, Slow Death TM and © respective copyright holder.

due to an ever-growing interest in other entertainment vehicles such as television.

Comics from all standard comics publishers—Archie, Charlton, DC, Dell, Gold Key, Harvey and Marvel—sold for 15¢ per copy, a 50% increase in cover price since 1960. Giant-size comics sold for 25¢ per copy. Warren, which released the magazine-sized comics *Creepy*, *Eerie* and *Vampirella*, sold its titles for 50¢ per copy, as did Warren's competitors Eerie Publications and Stanley Publications. Horror comics magazine *Web of Horror* cost 35¢ per copy. As the new decade began, DC Comics had the largest comic book line. DC released 28 comic books with a January 1970 cover date. The same month Marvel released 26 comics, Charlton 20, Harvey 18, Gold Key 17, Archie 16, Dell 5 and Warren 4.

Comic book publishers operated much as they had since the late 1930s. One area in particular had continued much the same since 1954:

the Comics Code Authority. For the industry's antiquated system of self-censorship 1970 would turn out to be a watershed year.

The Comics Code had been created as a way for companies to avoid the specter of the government stepping in to regulate the content of comic books. After a 1954 Senate subcommittee hearing on the "dangers" of comics to the youth of America, most comics publishers banded together to set down a code of "ethics" that banned the depiction of, among other things, violence, sex, the supernatural and crime as a way of life. Until 1970, the Comics Code was rigidly maintained. But the Code was too restrictive and no longer reflected the social mores in the complicated world that Americans lived in at the dawn of the 1970s.

There was no better demonstration of this than an appeal Marvel Comics made at a June 1970 meeting of the Comics Magazine Association of America—the body that oversaw the

Code. Marvel informed the CMAA that the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare had sent Marvel a letter requesting the publication of a story to warn comic book readers about the dangers of drugs. Marvel asked the CMAA for permission to publish this story even though it would clearly violate the Code's prohibition of even the mere mention of drugs.

At the June meeting the CMAA denied Marvel's request... but simultaneously agreed that the time had come to change the Code. The publishers were sent back to their offices, tasked with discussing with their editorial staffs the changes that should be made to the Code. A special meeting of the CMAA in December then reviewed the various proposed revisions, and the members ultimately approved the relaxation of many of the Code's previous restrictions. Among other things, sex, crime, supernatural monsters and drug use

Cracking the Code

It was an era of change. The rigid, unbending establishment was being chiseled away by the youth movement who didn't simply question the existing status quo but sought to create a new one. Consequently, the establishment began to doubt its very foundations, for the first time unsure of what the future held.

On January 12, 1971 a new television series attempted to encapsulate that era. *All in the Family* proved to be not only a controversial situation-comedy but also a microcosm of America's then-current conflict between the generations. In the show, the cantankerous Archie Bunker, a World War II veteran and dyed-in-the-wool blue collar man, was confronted by the burgeoning youth movement and America's growing acceptance of racial and gender equality. He attempted to stick to his mid-century values but soon found himself sinking in a sea of change. Archie was an unapologetic bigot and in many ways a distorted reflection of America itself.

Like *All in the Family*, the mainstream comic book industry was playing out its own generational conflicts. Publishers continued to deal with ever-slumping sales, and their hope was that unconventional projects—executed, more often than not, by the younger creators—could reverse that downward sales trend. That meant that professionals who had been toiling in the industry for years—if not decades—were finding themselves being pushed out in favor of the young.

As the battle between the generations waged on, however, a matter of greater immediate concern affected just about every American citizen and business in 1971: inflation.

Raising Prices

The U.S. inflation rate in 1971 exceeded 4%, a number that frightened many. In August President Nixon made a series of moves to combat inflation. In what would become known as the “Nixon Shock,” the President suspended the convertibility of the U.S. dollar into gold and instituted a 90-day freeze on both wages and retail prices. Nixon's decisions were praised by many among the press and public as necessary protections against price gouging.

Meanwhile, artist **Carmine Infantino** had been rising through the management ranks at National Periodical Publications (a.k.a. DC Comics) since 1967 when he was promoted to the role of the company's Art Director. His cover designs were hailed as innovative and fresh. Though not

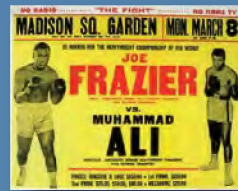
CHAPTER TWO

TIMELINE: 1971

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

January 12: *All in the Family*, a sitcom starring Carroll O'Connor as a bigoted working-class father, premieres on the CBS television network. It would become America's highest-rated show from 1971 to 1976 and win multiple Emmy Awards.

February 1: The Comics Code Authority's revised Code goes into effect. Among other things, the new Code now allows for the depiction of vampires, ghouls and werewolves, as long as they are presented in the "classic" literary tradition (i.e. Dracula, Frankenstein). Depictions of drug abuse are also now permitted.



March 8: In "The Fight of the Century" Joe Frazier retains his World Heavyweight title against challenger Muhammad Ali in a boxing match at New York City's Madison Square Garden. The event transcends the sport as it draws the attention of the entire nation and becomes a symbol of the country's racial divide (even though both boxers are African-American).

April 6: The "Kree/Skrull War" begins in *Avengers* #89. The nine issue story arc would become one of Marvel's most celebrated tales.

April 20: The villainous Ra's Al Ghul makes his first appearance in *Batman* #232.



June: DC Comics raises the price of its standard comic books from 15¢ to 25¢. Each title has its page count raised from 32 to 48.

June 12: Former DC Comics romance editor Zena Carol Brody dies of cancer at the age of 43.

June 13: *The New York Times* begins publishing "The Pentagon Papers," a classified Department of Defense history of the United States' involvement in Vietnam. The papers principally reveal that the Lyndon B. Johnson administration had lied to both the American public and Congress about its intentions in Vietnam.

JANUARY

January 14: The first issue of *Mister Miracle*—the third of Jack Kirby's Fourth World titles—goes on sale at newsstands.



FEBRUARY



February 9: Written by Stan Lee with art by Gil Kane and John Romita, *Amazing Spider-Man* #96 focuses on drug abuse. Because the issue was produced before the Comics Code Authority's new Code went into effect, no CCA symbol appears on the cover. It is the first Marvel Comic to appear without a Code seal since the Code went into effect in 1954.

MARCH

March 28: CBS airs the final broadcast of the *The Ed Sullivan Show*. After three months of re-runs and pre-emptions, CBS announces in June that *The Ed Sullivan Show* has been cancelled.

April 1: Swamp Thing is introduced in DC's *House of Secrets* #92 in a story written by Len Wein and drawn by Berni Wrightson.

APRIL

MAY



June 24: In a story written by Denny O'Neil and drawn by Neal Adams, *Green Lantern* #85 reveals that Green Arrow's ward, Speedy, is a heroin addict.

June 30: The 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution is ratified. It lowers the minimum voting age from 21 to 18.

JUNE

Green Arrow, Green Lantern, Mister Miracle, Ra's al Ghul, Speedy TM and © DC Comics. Avengers, Defenders, Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

of titles, including the Richie Rich group, *Little Lotta* and *Casper* to 25¢ in cover date November and December 1971. On the other hand, Archie, Charlton and Gold Key avoided the 52-page, 25¢ size format for most of their titles. Maybe most significantly, Marvel's Martin Goodman made a handshake deal with Infantino and agreed to implement DC's price hike for his own standard titles.

Nine of Marvel's 15 titles with an October 1971 cover date had 52 pages (mostly devoted to new stories but with substantial reprints as well) and a 25¢ cover price. In November, 23 of Marvel's 29 titles sold for a quarter. With the December cover date, however, only nine of Marvel's 25 comics—mostly reprints—were 25¢. After a brief flirtation with running his entire line at the 52-page, 25¢ price, Goodman changed his mind. He dropped the comics back to 36 pages (counting covers) and dropped the cover price to 20¢.

Goodman was no dummy. By offering comic books that were five cents cheaper than a typical DC title, he made Marvel look like a hero to consumers. In actuality, though, Goodman was offering books with the same page count from earlier in the year for five cents *more*. Goodman also manipulated the business from the distributor side. Goodman approached newsstand owners and operators and offered them a larger slice of the profit pie than they had normally received from selling comics. In return, Goodman received more space on the newsstand racks for Marvel Comics.

Goodman's decision to revert back to the smaller page count caught three of Marvel's most important employees off-guard: Editor Stan Lee, Associate Editor Roy Thomas and Production Manager John Verpoorten. When first informed that Marvel's comic books would have more story pages, the three men compensated by com-

missioning longer stories. One month later, they were told their page counts were being reverted. That meant the longer stories that had already been produced couldn't be printed in one issue.

The short-term result was a mish-mash of content and formats across Marvel's line. In some titles—like *Fantastic Four* and *Hulk*—the longer stories were simply spread out over two issues and a short back-up story was inserted in order to fulfill the second issue's page count. Other titles—like *Sub-Mariner*—reprinted classic material. As Roy Thomas told *American Comic Book Chronicles*, "We got by as best we could... and then it was back to business as usual."

Marvel maintained a line of 25¢ reprint titles throughout 1971 and 1972, including reprint "Specials" for *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, *Thor*, *Tower of Shadows*, *Avengers*, *Daredevil*, *Hulk*, *Mad About Millie* and *Sub-Mariner*. In addition, several

July 3: Jim Morrison—lead singer of The Doors—dies of a heart attack at the age of 27.

July 24: Golden age comic book artist Lou Fine dies at the age of 56.

August 15: In order to combat inflation, President Nixon suspends the conversion of dollars to gold and imposes a 90 day freeze on prices, rents and wages.

September 9: Prisoners riot and seize control of the Attica Correctional Facility near Buffalo, New York. The siege lasts four days until New York State Troopers retake the facility through tear gas and gunfire. Ten hostages and 33 inmates die.

October 1: Walt Disney World officially opens in Orlando, Florida.



December 14: The conclusion to the Kree-Skrull War arrives at newsstands with *Avengers* #97, written by Roy Thomas and drawn by John Buscema and Tom Palmer.

JULY

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

July 20: *Marvel Feature* #1 collects the Hulk, the Sub-Mariner, and Doctor Strange as the Defenders in a story written by Roy Thomas and drawn by Ross Andru and Bill Everett.



September: One month after increasing the price point of all its standard comic books to 25¢, Marvel lowers its price point to 20¢. Page counts are dropped back to 36.



October: African American hero John Stewart debuts in *Green Lantern* #87 in a story written by Denny O'Neil and drawn by Neal Adams and Dick Giordano.

November 24: D.B. Cooper hijacks a plane departing from Portland, Oregon. Upon landing in Seattle, Washington, Cooper receives \$200,000. After the plane takes off for Reno, Nevada, Cooper parachutes out the tail end. He is neither seen nor heard from again. His story, however, will become the stuff of legend.

ongoing series remained at the quarter cover-price, including the reprint series *Fear*, *Marvel's Greatest Comics*, *Special Marvel Edition*, *Western Gunfighters* and *Marvel Tales*.

Marvel's move back to 20¢ would have seismic effects on the industry. When Marvel dropped its cover price to 20¢ per issue, industry newszine *Newfangles* #48 noted that "wholesalers objected to the 25-cent books which sell fewer copies and make the dealer only a penny more than the better-selling 15-cent books (yes, only a penny more)." *Newfangles* #49 then reported that Marvel was offering its comic books to retailers at half the cost: every 20¢ Marvel comic book would cost retailers 10¢. Since DC was only giving retailers 5¢ for the sale of its 25¢ comic books, DC was being undercut, and retailer support shifted to Marvel.

By *Newfangles'* next issue, the "pricing war" was seen to have escalated, in a way, with DC announcing it

would match Marvel's offer of 10¢ a copy for every sale of its 25¢ books. However, retailers were still selling more Marvel books at 20¢ than DC books at 25¢. The same issue of *Newfangles* announced that DC might offer the newsstand 12½¢ a copy for a couple of months (with the loss being underwritten by the Kinney conglomerate, DC's parent company) in an attempt to force the rest of the comic book industry to adopt the 25¢ cover price.

That didn't work, as *Newfangles* #52 explained:

There are indications that DC is in serious trouble. Dealers are not too keen on the 25¢ comic book, sales are skyrocketing for Marvel, Charlton, and Gold Key (GK has 15¢ books, Marvel and Charlton 20¢), DC is contemplating major changes in Superman and Batman (and no one fools around with success, so...)

and DC has taken to labeling its 48-page books as 52-page books (a cheap trick; no page increase, they just started counting the covers)... DC's titles are also reported to be dying in droves on the stands, if they get that far - wholesalers prefer to handle the 20¢ books, apparently.

Infantino later looked back on the situation with resignation. "The price stricture was set up by [NPP accountant Paul] Wendell, [Kinney executive Marc] Iglesias, and [Warner Publishing President Harold] Chamberlin," he said. "Marvel had the 20¢ books and they took the lead in sales. Why they took the lead is the 50% discount so the distributors and wholesalers made more money with Marvel. So the distributors put out Marvel and couldn't have cared less about us. Eventually we had to give 50% off because we were getting slaughtered. We had to drop to 20¢" (Cooke 12).



DC 100-Page Super Spectacular #DC-6 boasted a wraparound cover by Neal Adams that featured "The World's Greatest Superheroes." TM and © DC Comics.

ity ended in 1985's universe-smashing *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

In all, 1971's "Amazing New Adventures" surfaced and submerged in a relatively short time. By the September cover-dated issue of *Superman*, the "New" was dropped from the banner. It read simply "Amazing Adventures." Industry and fan buzz for "Kryptonite Nevermore" aside, O'Neil claims Schwartz blamed low sales for the reason for the experiment's ultimate demise. "I think he looked upon it as an interesting thing that ultimately didn't work," the writer said (Eury 117). Sales figures bear this out, as in 1971 *Superman* continued its drop in sales from the 1960s, losing an average of 23,000 copies sold per issue from the previous year. It would seemingly take much more than depowering the world's greatest hero to save him from a downward economic spiral.

If DC's sales couldn't be improved by tinkering with its most iconic character, perhaps it could be improved in another way. One of DC's more notable efforts of 1971 was the creation of a new, enormous reprint title called *DC 100-Page Super Spectacular*, which came overflowing with reprints that ran the gamut from recent 1960s fare to Golden Age stories from the 1930s and 1940s that many of DC's younger readers had never been exposed to. The inaugu-

ral issue—strangely designated "DC-4"—showcased *Weird Mystery Tales*. The next issue, "Love Stories," sold out almost its entire print run, with only 178 unsold copies (Levitz). *DC 100-Page Super Spectacular* #DC-6 boasted a wraparound cover by Neal Adams that featured "The World's Greatest Superheroes." Inside, the issue reprinted the first meeting between the JLA and JSA (from 1963's *Justice League of America* #21-22) as well as a Silver Age Hawkman tale (from 1960's *The Brave and the Bold* #36) and Spectre, Johnny Quick, and Vigilante stories from the 1940s and 1950s. This new book was priced at 50¢, but Infantino was optimistic it would perform well financially (especially since the creators of all these reprinted tales weren't being paid again for work they performed years and decades ago). Infantino's faith was later rewarded by pleasing profits... if only for this one title (Cooke 12).

Roy's Avengers War

By 1971, Stan Lee had been slowly relinquishing his tightly-held reins on Marvel's titles, allowing others to step into the breach and prove themselves as storytellers. One of the most unique choices for a Lee stand-in was eighteen-year-old Brooklyn native **Gerry Conway**.

Having already written scripts for DC Comics since 1969 (mostly for *House of Secrets*), Conway became acquainted

1972

The Paradigm Shifts

In the 1972 U.S. Presidential election Republican incumbent Richard Nixon defeated Democratic challenger George McGovern in a 49-state landslide. Throughout his campaign, Nixon appealed to his “Silent Majority” of constituents who believed in traditional American power, influence and morals.

But while Nixon’s reelection could be seen as a triumph for conservative political and social values in the post-hippie era, 1972 was also the year that old-style attitudes collided with a shift in pop culture. The movies and television shows that Americans had been previously eager to consume were now considered out of touch with the tenor of the times, replaced with more provocative material. For instance, the most watched film of 1972, *The Godfather*, combined a classically American embrace of family with anti-heroic protagonists who thought nothing of killing their rivals and creating terror among ordinary people. Three of the ten highest-grossing movies of 1972—*Deep Throat*, *Beyond the Green Door* and *Fritz the Cat* (based on a character created by Robert Crumb)—featured explicit sex scenes and were restricted only to adults. Just a few years earlier, such material would have been banned from most American theatres. The massive success of these movies spurred a great national debate about pornography and censorship.

On TV, new technology and approaches abounded. On the top-rated CBS sitcom *Maude*, Beatrice Arthur’s character debated whether to have an abortion. Several months prior to that episode, *M*A*S*H*, based on the irreverent 1970 anti-war film, started its decade-long run. The influential show *Kung Fu* debuted in the fall of 1972, and for the first time, more than half of all U.S. households owned color TV sets. On November 8, 1972, pay TV service HBO began its programming with a hockey game between the New York Rangers and Vancouver Canucks.

For the comic book industry, 1972 was a year of transitions. Stan Lee handed the day-to-day management of the Marvel line over to his protégé Roy Thomas, just as that line was expanding with new series that were intended to diversify Marvel’s readership and which could not have been published just a few years previously. Elsewhere, DC dealt with a major slump in its sales, while the underground comix movement—which represented a more irreverent,

CHAPTER THREE



Ghost Rider combined motorcycle stunt riding and supernatural vengeance with a super-hero element. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

that succeeded the Werewolf in *Marvel Spotlight* was another major addition to Marvel's horror-driven mini-line.

Johnny Blaze's Life Catches Fire

Ghost Rider first blazed onto the comic book scene in *Marvel Spotlight* #5 (Aug. 1972). The cover to that issue, drawn by Ploog, shows a black leathered motorcyclist attacking a street gang. Fire streaks from his ghostly skull. Various blurbs claim, "A legend is born!," "Is he alive... or dead?," and "The most supernatural super-hero of all!" The story inside proved that the superlatives were not just Marvel hype.

Created by the team of Roy Thomas, Mike Ploog and writer Gary Friedrich, Ghost Rider bore a visual similarity to the 1940s hero Blazing Skull. Golden Age comics fan Thomas, though, didn't have that previous character in mind as he co-created his new anti-hero. Thomas and crew also weren't looking to revive Marvel's (and Magazine Enterprises') western hero Ghost Rider. Coincidentally, the 1967 adventures of that Ghost Rider were scripted by Friedrich, as had been Skywald Magazines' short-lived

motorcyclist hero Hell-Rider from 1971. This new Ghost Rider was different than all those previous characters. He was born when Friedrich came to Thomas with a weird concept for a villain to be used in the pages of *Daredevil*. As Friedrich told his long-time friend about his idea, Thomas decided that the creation was too intriguing to be used as a simple one-shot super-villain. After running the proposal past Stan Lee, Thomas gave this new Ghost Rider his own solo series.

Thomas made an appointment for Friedrich to come to the Marvel offices to discuss this new project, but Friedrich missed the meeting. Undaunted, Thomas and Ploog plunged ahead with the book. Thomas suggested that Ghost Rider wear a costume similar to the leather jumpsuit that Elvis Presley wore in his 1968 comeback special. Ploog started drawing what Thomas described, adding flames around Ghost Rider's head, simply because he thought it would look great if the character's head was on fire. When Friedrich arrived at the office the next day, he saw Ploog's designs and told Thomas, "Yup. Just like I envisioned him" (Cooke, "Heir Apparent" 28).

Friedrich and Ploog then collaborated to produce Ghost Rider's origin, one as spectacularly bleak as any that had appeared in comics to that point. The pathos of the tale is emphasized by the fact that it is narrated in the second-person, as if the narrator is speaking to Blaze. Johnny Blaze's father Benton was a daredevil motorcycle stunt rider who died in a horrifying crash when Johnny was very young. Benton's partner Crash Simpson adopted Johnny and raised him like his own son alongside his own daughter, Roxanne. But tragedy strikes the Simpson family as well: at the age of 15, when training to join the Simpson stunt show, Johnny's adoptive mother is killed in an accident. On her deathbed, Johnny swears to his second lost parent that he will never ride in the show. Blaze keeps his promise to himself even while Crash berates him for his ap-



Johnny Blaze transformed into the supernatural Ghost Rider. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

parent cowardice. Secretly, though, Blaze has been training himself to be a rider—a fact he only shares with his beloved Roxanne. On the eve of the biggest chance of Crash's career, the father figure reveals that he has an illness that will kill him in one month's time. Johnny Blaze takes action in a surprising way: he makes an invocation to Satan, promising his eternal servitude in exchange for saving Crash's life from the disease. Before Satan's word can be tested, Crash decides to tempt fate at the end of his life with a major spectacle: he chooses to jump 22 cars, an almost impossible feat.

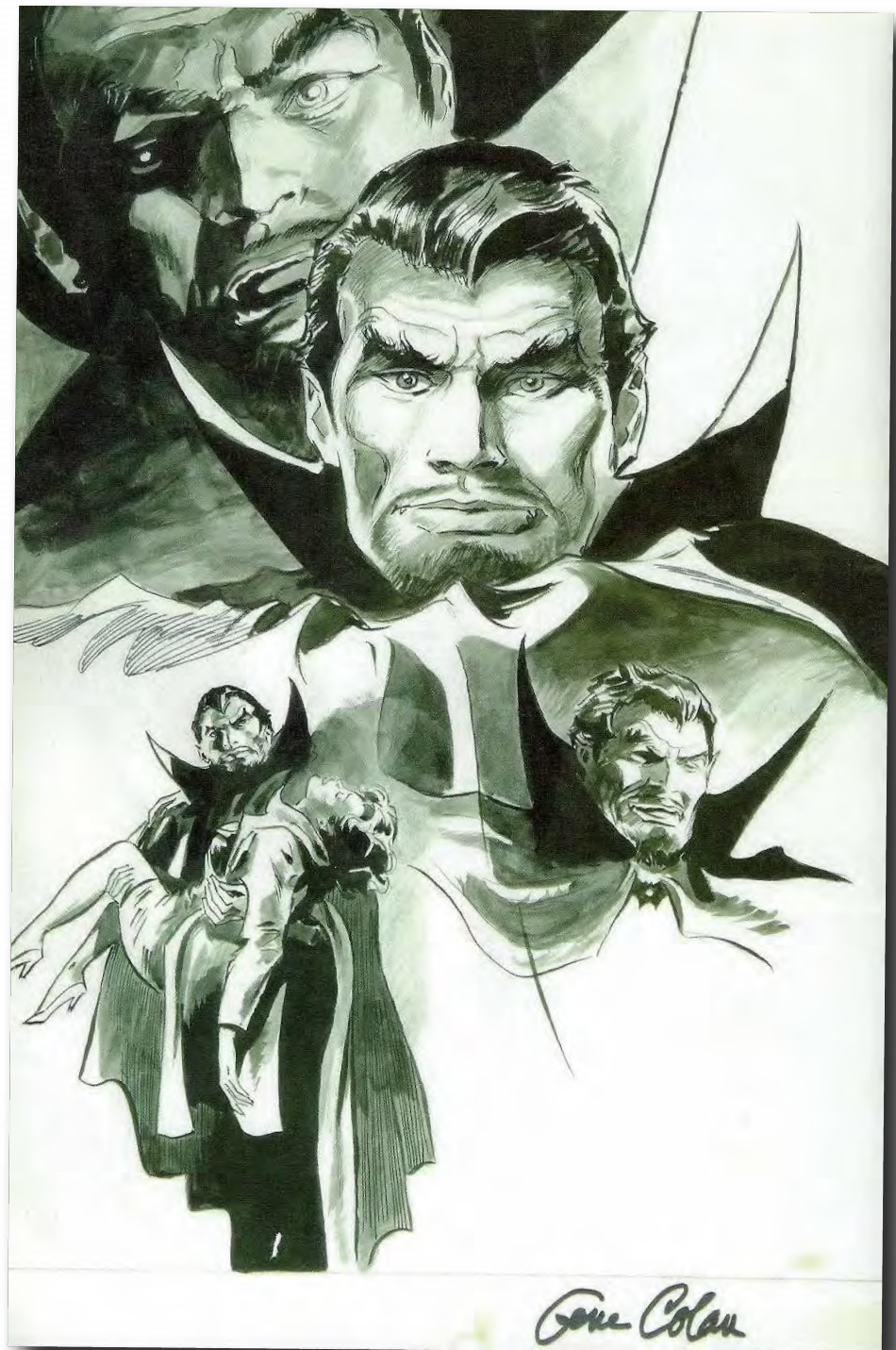
Crash jumps his cycle, but it falls short of the landing ramp and once again tragedy has struck Johnny Blaze. His second father has died. In an attempt to get over his anger, Johnny goes to a darkened arena and jumps the 22 cars himself. The act forces Roxanne to angrily break up with him. Soon the devil appears and lets Johnny know his fate: "from this day forth, you will walk the earth as my emissary in the dark hours... and in the light you will join me in Hades." True to his threat, the Devil turns Blaze into a skeletal figure with a blazing skull as the issue wraps up. Johnny Blaze flees his surroundings, desperate to find some real peace in his world.

Clearly, Ghost Rider's story contains elements that likely never would have passed the Comics Code only two years previously, especially the central concept of the lead character selling his soul to the devil. The comic taps into many interests that were part of the public imagination in the early 1970s: the popularity and rebel spirit of motorcycles, the admiration of motorcycle stunt riding as exemplified by Evel Knievel's widespread fame, and finally, an increased interest in the occult.

Little surprise then that *Ghost Rider* became another major hit for the rapidly evolving Marvel line.

Dracula Lives

Since the revisions to the Comics Code allowed for depictions of Dracula, it was inevitable that Marvel would launch a new comic featuring the Lord of Vampires as soon as the opportunity arose. In fact, Marvel's *Dracula*



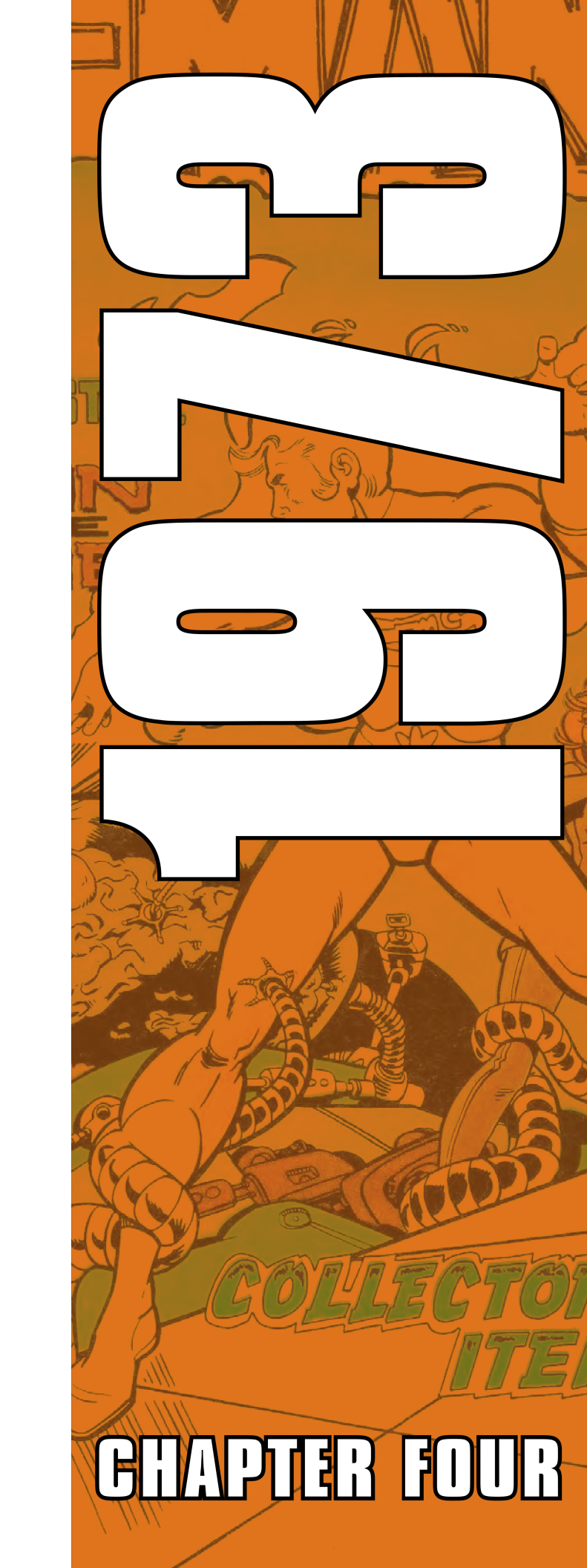
Gene Colan created a try-out page in order to win the art job on *Tomb of Dracula*.
TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

series was hyped a year before it actually appeared. A *Marvel Bullpen Bulletin*, appearing in all of Marvel's July 1971 cover-dated comics, proclaimed:

Savage Tales looks like such a howlin' hit that we're following it up with a ghoulish 50¢ goodie called *The Tomb of Dracula* (or *The House of Dracula*. We haven't decided yet.) It's a wholly new concept, starring Dracula himself, as he is – was – and

perhaps will be. With art by Gene Colan, Berni Wrightson and Gray Morrow among others, and a team of the world's most titanic scripters, headed by Marvel's merry masters, Smilin' Stan and Rascally Roy themselves! May we modestly say – it ain't to be missed!

Three months after that announcement, Marvel notified its readers that *Tomb of Dracula* would be released as a standard sized comic priced at



1973

COLLECTOR
ITEM

CHAPTER FOUR

Innocence Lost

By 1973, there was a pervasive feeling circulating amongst Americans that their once powerful country—which only thirty years earlier had won World War II—was now in a state of decline. People had lost faith in their government, in their military and in their economic invulnerability. On March 29, 1973, President Richard Nixon declared in a nationwide address that the Vietnam War was over. For the first time in eleven years, no American troops were stationed in Southeast Asia. Though citizens were happy about the fact that American boys were no longer facing the prospect of death in a faraway Asian land, the Vietnam War was widely seen—at best—as a draw. For all its mighty power, the United States could not win a military conflict in a third world country, a major sign of the decline of American influence in the world.

As 1973 proceeded, revelations in the ongoing Watergate scandal continued to consume the attention and energy of President Nixon while sapping Americans' patience. The sordid spectacle of Congressional hearings into the unfolding scandal was an inescapable sight on TV during the spring and summer months, as aide after aide testified. Even worse, the President defied public subpoenas to release the secret recordings that he had made of conversations in the White House, only backing down after the Supreme Court forced him to do so. However, those "Watergate Tapes" contained a mysterious 18 and a half minute gap that immediately fed conspiracy theories. Compounding the nation's deep sense of malaise and frustration was the October resignation of Nixon's Vice President, Spiro Agnew, on bribery charges unrelated to the other events in the White House.

Meanwhile, the comics industry itself faced significant changes: **Stan Lee**, perhaps the most influential writer of his era, had completely divested himself from scripting—though he was still active behind the scenes and as a public face for Marvel; a newly created distribution system would radically change the way that comics were purchased in the United States; new heroes were born who represented a different view of society, and a popular character was brutally slain, underlining the loss of innocence that many Americans felt in 1973.

Undoubtedly, the United States was moving into a profoundly different period in its history. So too was the comic book industry. In fact, some analysts set 1973 as the year that comics shifted from the "Silver Age" to the "Bronze Age." A darkness was emerging in mid-1970s America, and a tarnished Bronze Age of Comics reflected that darkness.

Fantastic Four No More!

Marvel's two most popular series encapsulated that sense of transition to a darker era, as *Fantastic Four* and *Amazing Spider-Man* experienced major, painful transitions in 1973. Neither comic book was being written by the man who had helmed them since their respective beginnings, Stan Lee. Indeed, after scripting *Fantastic Four* #125 (Aug. 1972), Lee stepped away from comic book writing entirely.

Initially succeeding Lee on *Fantastic Four* was **Roy Thomas**, and he immediately began to splinter the fabled foursome. The turmoil started with The Thing. Wallowing in self-pity over the fact that he will never be normal again, Ben Grimm walks out on his teammates. Then, in *FF* #130 (Jan. 1973) Sue Storm Richards, the Invisible Girl, becomes fed up with her husband's thoughtless ways. She says to Mr. Fantastic, "In the heat of battle, you didn't think of me as a member of the team – not even as a wife – only as 'the mother of your child.' I won't accept that, Reed. Not now – not ever!" Sue stayed away from the *FF* for several months. During that time, The Human Torch also left the group in order to travel to the Inhumans' Great Refuge and live with his girlfriend Crystal. She, however, rejects him for the mutant Quicksilver, whom she subsequently marries in 1974.

In the course of this turmoil, the group gained a new member with *FF* #132 (March 1973) when Black Bolt, king of the Inhumans, requests that his subject Medusa join the *FF* as an emissary to the outside world while also filling Sue Storm's slot until she returns. In the same issue, Johnny switches to a red-and-gold costume from his customary blue-and-black, as a tribute to the original Human Torch. But even while Johnny enjoyed his new outfit, the team's mood could be summed up by the Thing's statement in *FF* #133: "Swell buncha jokers we are. It's almost midnight on New Year's Eve an' between the five of us, we can't crack one crummy smile."

That's when Roy Thomas handed the *Fantastic Four* writing reins over to **Gerry Conway**. In short time, the 20-year-old scribe had become a principal writer in Marvel's roster of talent. Just as importantly, Conway frequently turned up the Marvel formula of turmoil and soap-operatic emo-



The *Fantastic Four* experienced major turmoil in 1973. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

tions to an even higher level than Lee and Thomas had done before him. Conway's *Fantastic Four*, in particular, is an unremitting stream of changes, betrayals and anger beneath the super-heroic trappings.

In other words, Conway kept matters quite miserable for the heroes: Sue and Reed remained separated, Ben spent a great deal of effort dealing with his depression, and Johnny struggled to find his place in the team. Most terrifying of all, Reed and Sue's son Franklin Richards started to manifest incredible new powers that could destroy the entire universe. In *FF* #141 (Dec. 1973), Reed makes a terrible sacrifice: he uses an anti-matter gun to shut down the mind of his own son lest all reality cease to exist. That action would trigger still more tumult in the following year. All in all, 1973 was not a good year to be associated with the *Fantastic Four*.

The Night Gwen Stacy Died

Nor was 1973 a good year to be a member of *Spider-Man's* cast. Marvel's Editor-in-Chief Roy Thomas and Art Director **John Romita** recognized that *Amazing Spider-Man* had been in creative doldrums (Thomas 19). Romita suggested employing a trope from his favorite comic, *Terry and the Pirates*: kill a supporting character to help reinvigorate the series. When it came time to choose who should be sent to the grave, Thomas felt that the logical choice would be to kill the elderly Aunt May, who always seemed to be at death's door. But Romita suggested a more radical choice: one of the beautiful women in Peter Parker's life: either **Gwen Stacy** or **Mary Jane Watson**.



As the *Fantastic Four* ring in the new year, Johnny Storm can't help but temper Reed Richards's optimism. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

TIMELINE: 1973

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

January 11: The Dow Jones Industrial Average peaks at 1051.70. The stock market then begins a 24 month decline, eventually losing 46% of its value.

February 25: The once-celebrated *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip ends its 38-year run.



February 27: Comic book artist Bill Everett, best known for creating the Sub-Mariner in 1939, dies at the age of 55.

March 13: *Amazing Spider-Man* #121—presenting the death of Peter Parker's girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, in a story written by Gerry Conway and drawn by Gil Kane and John Romita—arrives on newsstands.



April 20: The University of California hosts the three day Berkeley Con which specifically focuses on the underground comix industry. Attendees include Kim Deitch, Rick Griffin, Gilbert Shelton, Spain Rodriguez and Art Spiegelman, among others.

June 1: Comic book artist Werner Roth, best known for drawing *X-Men* during the late 1960s, dies at the age of 52.

May 17: The U.S. Senate begins its televised hearings into the Watergate scandal.

June 3: Comic book artist Syd Shores, best known for inking Jack Kirby's work on *Captain America* in the 1940s and 1960s, dies at the age of 59.

June 27: Roger Moore is the new James Bond as *Live and Let Die* opens in movie theaters.

JANUARY | **FEBRUARY** | **MARCH** | **APRIL** | **MAY** | **JUNE**

January 22: In *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that a woman's right to privacy encompasses the right to terminate a pregnancy. States can no longer outlaw abortion.

January 30: A jury finds defendants G. Gordon Liddy and James McCord guilty of crimes in connection with the break-in of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate hotel in Washington, DC.

March 29: President Nixon announces that the last American troops have left South Vietnam. Thus ends America's direct military involvement in the Vietnam War.



May: 18-year-old high school senior Mitchell Mehdy makes national headlines when he buys a copy of 1938's *Action Comics* #1 for \$1801.25, the highest price ever paid for a vintage comic book.



June 9: Secretariat wins the Belmont Stakes, becomes horse racing's first Triple Crown winner since 1948.

June 21: In *Miller v. California*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that states may ban materials found to be obscene according to local standards. The ruling will have a devastating impact on the underground comix industry.

The Super Friends TM and © DC Comics. Punisher, Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. The Shadow TM and © Condé Nast.

Blonde, beautiful, possessing a vivacious personality and, most importantly, in love with our hero, Gwen Stacy was a fan-favorite. For this reason, Romita persuaded Thomas that she should die because the killing would have shock value: “I thought if somebody had to die, it should be Gwen. I thought she was so important, [the readers] imagined she would never die” (Johnson 57). *Amazing Spider-Man* writer Gerry Conway didn't need much convincing to kill her, mostly because he hated the character: “She was a nonentity, a pretty face. She brought nothing to the mix” (Howe 136). Furthermore, Stacy's death would open the door to setting up a relationship between Peter and Mary Jane, whom Conway saw as far more intriguing.

The creative decision, then, was made, but Marvel's publisher, Stan Lee, still needed to sign off on it. Tentatively, Thomas approached his boss with the proposal, but rather than balk, Lee enthusiastically approved the killing of this character that he had written for nearly a decade. In fact, as Thomas saw it, Lee was more excited about the idea than he was (Thomas 19).

Amazing Spider-Man #121 (June 1973) features an unusual cover: Spider-Man swinging from his web, spider-sense tingling, in front of portraits of nine of his title's supporting characters. On the cover, the hero ponders, “Someone close to me is about to die! Someone I cannot save! But who? WHO?” The issue's opening splash page doesn't dis-

play the story's title. Instead, Conway teased his readers in a caption that read, “As for its title: that's something we'd like to conceal for a while, but we promise you this, pilgrim – it's not a title you'll soon forget.”

The story opens with Spider-Man staring into his apartment window and seeing his best friend Harry Osborn, feverish from nearly overdosing on LSD. Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson sit alongside Harry at his sickbed. After Peter doffs his costume to head into the apartment, he's confronted by a furious Norman Osborn, Harry's father. Norman blames Peter for Harry's drug overdose. Peter, meanwhile, flashes back to the time when Harry donned the costume of his greatest enemy, the Green Goblin. Gwen and Mary Jane pull Peter away from Norman, whose own feverish brow gets even sweatier as he soon receives a phone call informing him that he's quickly losing his personal fortune. As the story proceeds, Norman finally snaps from all the stress he's enduring. In his own brownstone, Osborn sees a phantom Spider-Man. He runs from his home, screaming, eventually reaching a secret apartment that contains his villainous garb. Donning the familiar green and purple suit, Norman once again becomes the Green Goblin and he quickly kidnaps Gwen, leaving a pumpkin as his calling card.

Following his spider-sense, Spider-Man tracks the Goblin to the George Washington Bridge, engaging the villain in



The Son of Satan literally was the son of Satan, doing good deeds to stop his father's evil plans. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

gator/exorcist, and striving to destroy his inner demons by destroying the demons that lived in others.

The character boasted strong visuals, with Hellstrom riding a flaming chariot and fighting terrible demons, but maybe because of the title of his series, the Son of Satan never quite caught on as a protagonist. Artists Trimpe, Gene Colan and Bob McLeod never felt a deep connection to the series, and Friedrich left the book shortly after its debut. Despite some spooky issues written by Steve Gerber, "Son of Satan" ran to *Marvel Spotlight* #24 (Oct. 1975) before spinning out to a short, eight-issue run.

Marvel's Craziest Writer

Writing "Son of Satan" suited Steve Gerber perfectly as he was one of Marvel's most eccentric—and most prolific—writers. In 1973, the indefatigable Gerber contributed to several Marvel Comics titles, including *Daredevil*, *Iron Man*, *Sub-Mariner*, the "Zombie" feature in *Tales of the Zombie*, "Man-Thing" stories in *Fear*, and pieces for *Crazy* and *Vampire Tales*, among others. Through his stories, Gerber often shared his neuroses about New York City, violence and life in general,

usually delivered in humorous or bizarre ways. His "Man-Thing" stories, for instance, were a heady mix of teen mystics, naïve aliens and angry construction workers (who were employed by the cleverly named F.A. Schist). Meanwhile, his *Daredevil* run was an odd portrait of the times: *Daredevil* #100 (June 1973) includes a guest appearance by Jann Wenner, publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine—one of the newsstand's most popular magazines. Other storylines featured *Daredevil* and his paramour the Black Widow fighting the hippie villain Angar the Screamer and thwarting a plan by the mind-controlling Mandrill and his barely-clad assistant Nekra to raise a cult of black women to overthrow America.

Gerber's unconventional storytelling methods became emblematic of his era. Born in St. Louis, he was an active letter writer and editor as well as a longtime friend of Roy Thomas. He



Steve Gerber suffered from narcolepsy but was one of Marvel's most prolific writers in the 1970s.

published a number of fanzines in the '60s, including one called *Crudzine*. After college, Gerber landed a job at a St. Louis advertising agency but found the work so unsatisfying that in 1972 he wrote a letter to Thomas declaring that his advertising work was driving him crazy. Thomas quickly replied, directing his longtime friend to script six pages of a *Daredevil* car chase story. It was a test that enabled Thomas

to bring his pal to Marvel as an Associate Editor. Though Gerber had trouble staying awake on his day job due to narcolepsy, he rapidly found himself with enough writing assignments to earn decent money as a freelancer. Writing was his real passion anyway. As his frequent artistic collaborator Val Mayerik recalls, "Steve was very ambitious, and not in the sense of wanting money or power, but he had a very clear vision of what he wanted to do with comics. He was very committed, and he didn't want anything to stand in his way. He really wanted to write the stuff he wanted to write" (Johnson 16).

In fact, Gerber pushed the envelope as much as any writer of his era, engaging such topics as women's rights, environmentalism, and existential doubt in a unique style that combined Stan Lee's glibness with an element of angst that seemed an ideal reflection of the stress of the era. Steve Gerber respected the Marvel heroes and attitude, but he was too smart and too devoted to his own approach to the world to compromise his unique and personal attitude. Such an attitude was welcomed at Marvel, and as the succeeding years proved, Gerber thrived in that setting.

Crazy About the Monsters

One of Gerber's favorite assignments was writing for *Crazy*, part of a line of humor and horror magazines that Marvel launched to contend with Warren Publications, *Mad* (which was selling two million copies per month) and its competitors.

Martin Goodman, Marvel's former Publisher, had been discouraged by the poor distribution and low sales of three earlier Marvel magazines: *Spectacular Spider-Man* #1 and #2 (July and Nov. 1968) and *Savage Tales* #1 (May 1971). But by 1973, Marvel had new owners, Cadence Industries. With Goodman out of the picture—and with Skywald, Warren and the frequently schlocky Eerie Publications all profitable—Lee felt the time was ripe for Marvel to encroach onto the comic magazine marketplace.

adventures for the character and didn't seriously consider selling his rights to Marvel to allow other creators to work on the Spirit. Eisner also reached the talking stages of producing a new humor magazine for Marvel that would be a cross between *Mad* and the *National Lampoon* but nothing ever came from those talks.

Meanwhile, **Richard Corben** emerged in the underground movement in a big way in 1973. Then 32 years old and a veteran animator, Corben had been creating his own comics out of Kansas City as a side job from his paying work. He released hundreds of pages of comics in 1973, including work on his *Neverwhere* and *Den* series and material for Warren magazines – frequently with extravagant painted colors. By 1973, *Last Gasp* sold over 30,000 copies of Corben's *Fantagor*—very impressive numbers—and over 20,000 copies of his *Rowlf*. Corben's style was distinctively vivid due to his unique airbrush technique and for the strange otherworldly specters he created. For his work that year, Corben won the Shazam Award for Superior Achievement by an Individual.

Another unusual comic released in 1973 was a single volume adapting the Elric story “The Fall of the Dreaming City” by Steven Grant and John Adkins Richardson from Windy City Productions. This 44-page black-and-white comic retailed for \$1.00 and included a back cover by John Byrne. The rarely-seen and never-reprinted publication also featured “The Gates of Tyranna,” the first chapter of



The little-seen Elric: the Fall of the Dreaming City. TM and © Michael Moorcock.



Will Eisner drew new covers for the underground revival of his much-beloved character *The Spirit*. TM and © Will Eisner Studios Inc.

an original Elric adventure by George Olshevsky, Jr. and John Allison. Grant and Robert Gould, who later painted several Elric paperback covers, would go on to produce a new Elric story, “The Prisoner of Pan Tang,” for *Star*Reach* #6 (Oct 1976).

The most popular underground publishers released a smaller assortment of undergrounds than usual in 1973. Print Mint came out with *Zap Comix* #6, *Insect Fear* #3, *Manhunt* and a handful of more titles. *Last Gasp* published *Tales of the Leather Nun*, *Wimmen's Comix* #2, *Slow Death Funnies* #5 and several more. Apex Novelties produced *Funny Animals* and a few additional titles. Bill Griffith, Kim Deitch, Jerry Lane and Jay Lynch pooled their resources to create the Cartoonists Co-Op to publish *Middle Class Fantasies*, *Tales of Toad* #3, *Nard 'n Pat* #1 and *Corn Fed Comics* #2, but poor sales and major mistakes doomed them.

Like the violent and sexually explicit underground comics that Bill Griffith attacked, the *Elric* underground represented a new generation of thought in comics: edgier and more attuned to the turmoil of everyday life than many mainstream comics. As 1974 dawned, ongoing national crises would be reflected in still more confrontational material.



No More Heroes

As 1974 began, most Americans had to be hoping that the frustrations of 1973 were behind them. Unfortunately, the troubles that began in 1973 didn't go away once the new year started. In many ways, they only got worse.

In October 1973, OPEC—a coalition of most of the major oil-producing nations—launched an embargo of oil exports to the United States in response to America's support of Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The resulting shortage caused the price of a barrel of oil to spike from \$3 to \$12. Across the country, gas rationing commenced, which in turn caused lengthy gas station lines. The American public was tense and frustrated at the situation, reflected by the actions of the nation's truck drivers, who engaged in a two-day nationwide strike in December 1973 to show their anger at what they felt was the federal government's insufficient response to the crisis.

Though OPEC lifted its embargo in March 1974, America's economic turmoil continued throughout the year. In 1971, Americans fretted over an inflation rate that exceeded 4%. Three years later, the inflation rate had nearly tripled to 11%, the highest rate in 27 years. What's more, the stock market crash that began in January 1973 proved unrelenting. The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost over 45% of its value from the beginning of 1973 to the end of 1974.

As if that wasn't bad enough of a financial shock, a paper shortage—brought on by a series of strikes at paper mills and railroads in Canada—increased the price of paper by approximately 50% (Brancatelli). Publishers found themselves scrambling to gather enough paper to print their publications. For the comic book industry, the shortage resulted in several comics being published on irregular schedules during the year. DC Comics had to go one step further and cancel half a dozen titles. Charlton Comics, which operated as its own printer, halted its comic book line in late 1973. When production resumed in February 1974, the price of one of Charlton's comic books had increased to 25¢ (up from 20¢).

The strong sense among average Americans was that the country was being destroyed from within. The crime rate in America was growing at an alarmingly rapid rate. The number of violent crimes, burglaries, rapes, robberies and murders reported to the police in 1974 was nearly twice the number reported in 1967. The fear of crime accelerated Americans' migration to the suburbs, further continuing the fracturing of the country.

CHAPTER FIVE

July 2: The sharp-clawed Wolverine makes his first appearance on the final page of *The Incredible Hulk* #180, interrupting a battle between the Hulk and Wendigo.



July 24: *Death Wish*—starring Charles Bronson as a New York City architect who becomes a vigilante after the murder of his wife—arrives in movie theaters.

August: Roy Thomas steps down as Marvel Comics' editor-in-chief. He is replaced by Len Wein (who is in charge of the color comics) and Marv Wolfman (who is in charge of the black-and-white magazines).



September 7: *Shazam!*—a live action children's show starring Michael Gray as Billy Batson and Jason Bostwick as Captain Marvel—debuts on the CBS television network.

October 1: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—a horror film featuring a chainsaw-wielding cannibal who is partly based on real-life serial killer Ed Gein—premieres in an Austin, Texas movie theater.

October 13: Otto Binder—science fiction and comic book writer best known for his work on Fawcett's Captain Marvel—dies at the age of 63.

November: The first issues of Atlas' color comics line go on sale.

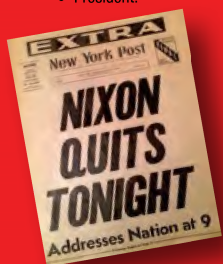


JULY

July 9: DC and Gold Key writer Leo Dorfman—who wrote many Superman stories during the 1960s—unexpectedly dies at the age of 60.

AUGUST

August 9: Facing impeachment due to the Watergate scandal, President Nixon resigns from office. Gerald Ford becomes the 38th U.S. President.



SEPTEMBER



September 10: In *Captain America* #180, written by Steve Englehart and drawn by Sal Buscema, a disillusioned Steve Rogers adopts the codename Nomad.

OCTOBER

October 8: President Ford announces his WIN (Whip Inflation Now) program in response to the nation's high inflation rate.

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER



December: DC's 100-Page Super-Spectacular format comes to an end.

ance. They brought him back just six months later in *Amazing Spider-Man* #135 (Aug. 1974) with the words “The Return of the Punisher” included in bold letters on the cover. (That cover would soon be merchandised as part of a collection of Marvel-themed Trapper Keepers, meaning it would be in the school backpacks of thousands of American schoolchildren.) Clearly, the man with the guns was destined to become a star.

Fierce Warrior from the North

Marvel's other key debut character of 1974 appeared in another major Marvel character's series. Though it would take some time, **Wolverine** would eventually become one of Marvel's most popular super-heroes.

In *Incredible Hulk* #180 (Oct. 1974), the Hulk and the white-furred monster Wendigo are waging a fierce battle in the deep woods of Quebec. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police are desperate to prevent the Hulk from

wreaking damage in the province, especially since he had created massive destruction to the country in a 1973 storyline. An RCMP captain orders, “Mobilize Weapon XI!” Fourteen pages later, the issue climaxes with the arrival of a snarling, yellow-and-black-suited man with sharp claws poking from his gloves. He announces, “All right, you freaks – just hold it! If you really want to tangle with someone – why not try your luck against – the Wolverine!” The final caption of *Hulk* #180 declares, “He’s a living, raging powerhouse who’s bound to knock you back on your emerald posterior.”

That dramatic entrance sets the tone for the epochal *Incredible Hulk* #181, as Wolverine injects himself into the middle of the intense clash between the Hulk and Wendigo. As writer **Len Wein** describes in a caption, Wolverine fights “with the savage ferocity of the creature from which he was named.” Wolverine battles the Wendigo tooth and claw, finally triumph-

ing over the monster. After the Wendigo is defeated, Wolverine quickly turns his attention to the Hulk. The duo engage in a vicious struggle, full of twists and turns as drawn by artists Herb Trimpe and Jack Abel. At a standstill, the two combatants are incapacitated by a bystander who hopes to cure her brother from the Wendigo's curse.

With a debut as equally vivid and star-making as that of the Punisher, Wolverine's vicious fighting skills, fierce fury and mysterious back-story made him stand out from Marvel's usual characters. What's more, Wolverine's initial appearance is peppered with vague allusions to a long, complex back-story involving the Canadian military. Appropriately for a character whose whole comics career has been shrouded in mystery, Wolverine begins his four-color life as an intriguing enigma.

Wolverine was the creation of several different hands. Initially, Marvel's ed-



John Romita's sketches for a new Hulk villain included a note that Wolverine is only 5' 5" tall. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.



Splash page from Hulk #181. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

itor-in-chief Roy Thomas simply wanted writer Wein to create a Canadian superhero as a way of

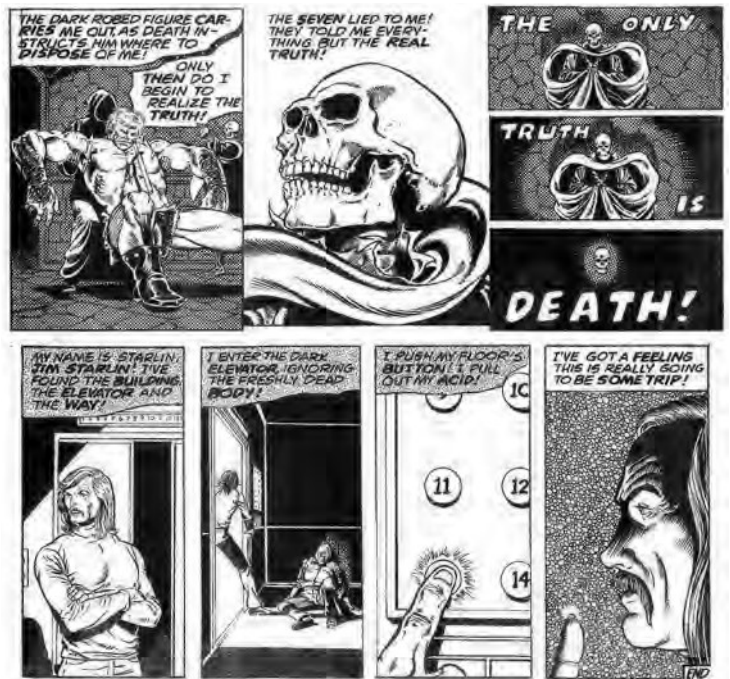
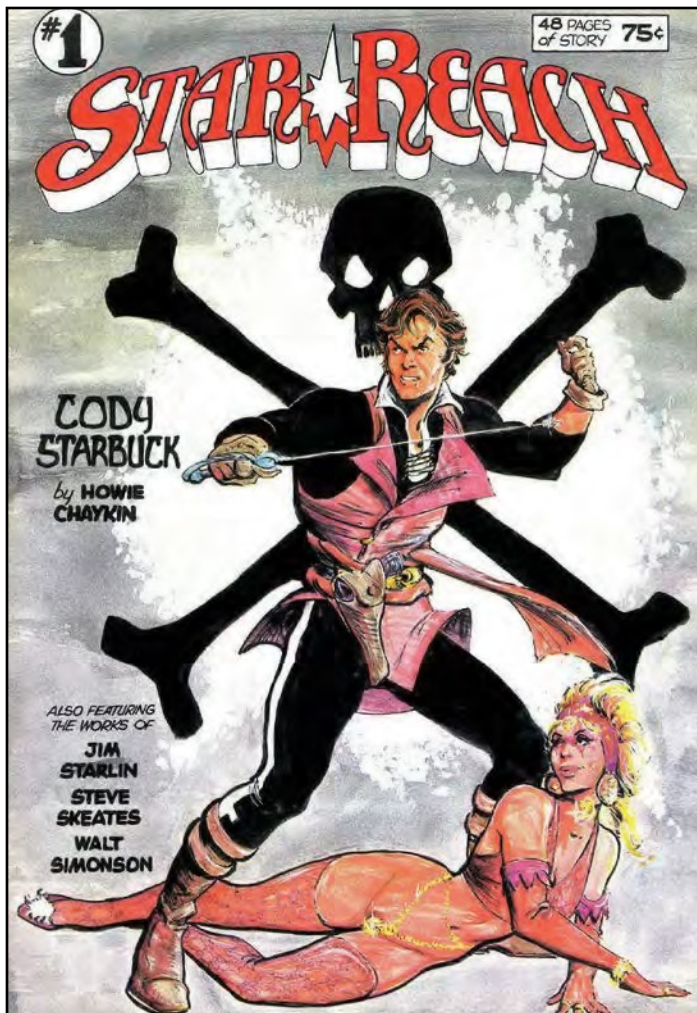
showing appreciation for Marvel's Canadian fans. Thomas supplied Wein with a name—Wolverine—and turned Wein loose to create the character. Wein applied himself to researching the nature of wolverines and soon found inspiration in the idea of a character who had the same tenacity as the small, ferocious, fearless creatures that will attack animals much larger than themselves. Interestingly, Wein did not see Wolverine's claws as part of his body; rather, Wein considered the claws as embedded in the mutant's gloves (Eury 27-28). John Romita designed Wolverine's initial look, one that featured a "whisker" design on Wolverine's face and low-cut ears.

But no matter the design, Wolverine was fated to be a star, and in 1975 he would become central to the most

influential super-team of the late 1970s. Wein and Thomas dispute whether Wolverine was planned from the beginning to be a member of Thomas's proposed globe-spanning new X-Men, but the character's initial blockbuster debut clearly indicates he was definitely slated to become a key member of the Marvel Universe.

Another violent Marvel character first appeared in 1974 as **Deathlok the Demolisher** began his run in the pages of *Astonishing Tales* #25 (Aug. 1974), succeeding the short-lived "It! The Living Colossus." The creation of *Fantastic Four* artist **Rich Buckler** and writer **Doug Moench**, Deathlok was a mutated half-human, half-cyborg named Luther Manning living in the dystopian future of 1990. Manning was a trained assassin who rebelled against his handlers, pursuing violent revenge against those who had destroyed his body and turned him into a killer.

The concept of cyborgs captured the public's imagination in the early 1970s. Martin Caidin's popular sci-



Among the artists featured in *Star*Reach* #1 were Howard Chaykin, with a “Cody Starbuck” story, and Jim Starlin, with a thinly-veiled tirade against Marvel Comics. TM and © Howard Chaykin, Inc. TM and © Jim Starlin.

promised “48 pages of story for 75¢,” and featured some of the hottest artists in the industry. *Star*Reach* #1 offered three stories by Jim Starlin, then riding high for his art on *Captain Marvel* and *Master of Kung Fu*; a 16 page “Cody Starbuck” story by Howard Chaykin, who was winning fan acclaim for his work on “Iron Wolf” in *Weird Worlds*; a strip called “A Tale of Sword and Sorcery” by Ed Hicks and Walt Simonson; and two short humorous pieces by longtime comics writer Steve Skeates.

Friedrich had been thinking about creating *Star*Reach* since 1972, when he began trying to assemble an adaptation of Robert E. Howard’s Bran Mak Morn character as its own freestanding comic. Friedrich got the very popular Barry Smith to work on that project, and Smith drew ten pages for the feature before abandoning it. (The story would later appear in a Marvel black-and-white magazine with art by Tim Conrad.) Smith and Friedrich’s management of the Bran Mak Morn comic consequently led to conversations with Jim Starlin and Howard Chaykin that in turn led to the first issue of *Star*Reach*.

Friedrich simply called up a few of his professional colleagues and asked them to contribute material to the book. As Chaykin stated in an interview for *American Comic Book Chronicles*, “They were just fun to do and the money was alright. Basically back then, myself, I did not have the energy, skills, or enthusiasm to do a consistent monthly book. I just wasn’t good enough. I didn’t get good enough until I

came back to comics after a sojourn as a paperback illustrator. The opportunity to do a short piece here and there was just another way to make a living, and *Star*Reach* was just another account.”

While *Star*Reach* was just another job for Howard Chaykin, for Jim Starlin it was an opportunity to present how he felt about working at Marvel at the time. His first *Star*Reach* story, “Death Building,” features an artist who walks into a New York City office building—at Madison and 55th Streets, where the Marvel offices also were located—and drops acid while he rides up the elevator. The artist, who claims he’s a “being of imaginations,” gets off the elevator and quickly slays a cloaked Death figure right before he himself is slain. In the final panel, another artist enters the building, a lamb to the slaughter. That artist’s name is revealed as Jim Starlin.

*Star*Reach* #1 was originally slated to be 32 pages. Friedrich, though, was hoping the book’s length could be stretched to 48 pages because “I, as a collector, had really liked the comics from the late 1940s through the early 1950s that had been 48 pages” (Arndt 23). Fortunately, Simonson had a story that he and his friend Ed Hicks had created in college that was available for reprinting. Thus, *Star*Reach* #1 attained the page count that Friedrich hoped for.

Though the comic cost nearly four times what a standard comic cost at the time, Friedrich sold out his initial 15,000 copy print run within six months. Thanks to a one-day comic convention in Berkeley shortly after the first issue was published, Friedrich was able to network with Bud Plant and Last Gasp, two of the major Direct Market comics distributors of the time. The show was held on a Saturday. By Monday, Plant and the team at Last Gasp had come back to Friedrich requesting reorders. As Friedrich later reflected, “I covered my printing costs within the first week” (Arndt 25). The comic sold by word of mouth, with



The High Cost of Expansion

A shark fin sliced through the surface of the Atlantic Ocean on June 20, 1975, creating a sea change in the way Hollywood made films. The overwhelming success of *Jaws* started an annual cycle of summer blockbuster films. Its influence splashed over into all sorts of other media, from board games to pop music. Comics picked up on the trend late in the second half of 1975, and carried it over well into 1976, likely due to the fact that comics are prepared months ahead of time. Covers featured man-eating sharks threatening bathers and super-heroes alike. A partial list of those comics includes *The Phantom* #66 (Aug. 1975), *Tarzan* #243 (Nov. 1975), *Action Comics* #456 (Feb. 1976), *Ghost Rider* #16 (Feb. 1976), *Casper the Friendly Ghost* #184 (March 1976), *Midnight Tales* #17 (March 1976), *Adventure Comics* #444 (April 1976), *House of Yang* #5 (April 1976), *Spidey Super Stories* #16 (April 1976) and *Weird Wonder Tales* #16 (June 1976). If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Steven Spielberg—the film’s director—and Roger Kastel—the man who came up with the artwork for the *Jaws* novel and movie poster—should be forever honored.

Movies were becoming louder, bolder, and more action-oriented, the exact qualities that typified comics, and in 1975, readers found plenty of new exciting comic titles to choose from. But every publisher was about to learn the high cost of expansion, particularly one new company, Atlas/Seaboard Comics, who tried to stand out from the crowd and take over the comics industry with a vengeance.

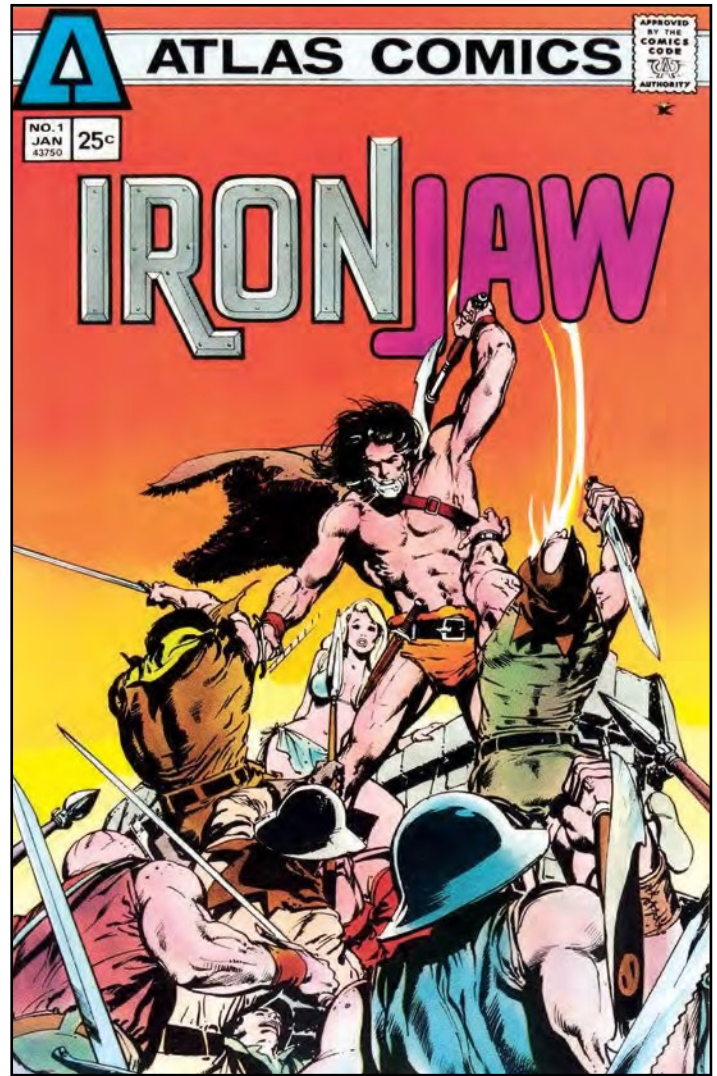
The Life and Death of Atlas/Seaboard

Martin Goodman launched Seaboard Periodicals in 1974, but the company’s first comics had a 1975 cover date. The founder of Marvel Comics back in 1939 when it was known as Timely Comics, Goodman changed his company’s name several times over the years in order to avoid taxes and stay ahead of postal inspectors. In 1951 Goodman started his own distribution company, Atlas News Company, and his comics displayed an Atlas globe on their covers. Atlas News collapsed in 1957, but it wasn’t until the early 1960s that Goodman began branding his company as Marvel Comics. That name would stick. When Goodman sold Marvel to Perfect Film and Chemical in 1968, the new owners promised to keep his son, Charles “Chip” Goodman, as Marvel’s Editorial Director and Martin himself was given a five year contract to remain with the company. In 1973, Perfect Film and Chemical changed its name to Cadence Industries, and Martin’s nephew-by-marriage, Stan Lee, made “an apparent power move” to become Marvel’s Publisher (Cooke 14). Chip lost his job as a result.

Martin was outraged by those developments, and he wasn't going to take them lying down. He started up a new periodical company, not only to give his son gainful employment but also to beat Marvel at its own game. For this reason, Goodman deliberately invoked Marvel Comics' lineage by naming his new comic book line **Atlas Comics**. (To distinguish the comic books Goodman published in the 1950s from those he published twenty years later, comic historians have referred to Goodman's 1970s line of comic books as Atlas/Seaboard.) Atlas/Seaboard editor **Jeff Rovin** said, "I really think at the time we started, [Martin] was just plain angry. He wanted to get something onto the newsstands fast, wanted to put money into it, wanted it to look good, just wanted to eat up rack space, and he wanted to punish Cadence Industries for mistreating Chip" (Cooke 28).

To accomplish all this, Martin Goodman knew he had to lure creators away from Marvel and rival DC by offering top dollar. Artist Ernie Colón recalled that when Rovin contacted him, he asked Colón what his page rate was. After the artist gave an inflated figure of \$65, Rovin said that Colón was "too good for that" and added \$40 *per page* to Colón's inflated rate. As Colón explained, "It was big money, that was a big raise!" (Cooke 49). At Rovin's behest, Goodman sweetened the pot by offering writers and artists profit-sharing as well as ownership of the characters they created for Atlas. Goodman also promised to return all original artwork to his freelancers (Rovin 101).

Goodman's work terms enticed an impressive number of comic book creators to cross the street (literally, in Marvel's case) over to Atlas/Seaboard. Besides Colón, Atlas's recruits included such prominent creators as Neal Adams, Sal Amendola, Pat Boyette, Howard Chaykin, Steve Ditko, Michael Fleisher, Dick Giordano, Archie Goodwin, Russ Heath, Jeff Jones, Pablo Marcos, Al Milgrom, Mike Sekowsky, John Severin, Walt Simonson, Frank Thorne, Alex Toth and Wally Wood.



Contributors to the Atlas line of comic books included Neal Adams (Ironjaw), Steve Ditko (Destructor), Howard Chaykin (The Scorpion) and Ernie Colón (Tiger-Man).
TM and © 1974 Seaboard Periodicals, Inc.

TIMELINE: 1975

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

January 4: Archie creator Bob Montana dies of a heart attack at the age of 54.

February 6: Longtime Batman nemesis The Joker receives his own title, courtesy of writer Denny O'Neil and artist Irv Novick.



April 9: Len Wein steps down as Marvel Comics' editor-in-chief. Marv Wolfman—who had been editing Marvel's black-and-white magazines—becomes editor of Marvel's entire line.

April 10: The long-absent Dr. Solar returns for a guest appearance in Gold Key's *Occult Files of Dr. Spektor* #14.

May 11: The Khmer Rouge regime seizes the American merchant ship *SS Mayaguez* in international waters off the coast of Cambodia. Four days later, 200 U.S. Marines storm the Cambodian island of Koh Tang. The captured *Mayaguez* crew members are released, but 40 U.S. servicemen are killed in the operation.



June 20: *Jaws*—directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw—is released to movie theaters. It would become the year's top grossing movie, earning over \$260 million at the box office.

JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
<p>January 6: The television game show <i>Wheel of Fortune</i> premieres on the NBC network.</p>	<p>February 20: Long-time Marvel Comics letterer Artie Simek dies at the age of 59. Besides lettering nearly every Marvel title during the 1960s, he also helped design the title logos.</p>		<p>April 1: <i>Giant-Size X-Men</i> #1, written by Len Wein and drawn by Dave Cockrum, presents a new version of the X-Men: Cyclops, Wolverine, Banshee and Sunfire are joined by new heroes Nightcrawler, Storm, Colossus and Thunderbird.</p>	<p>April 30: North Vietnamese soldiers surge into Saigon. The last American forces evacuate the city as South Vietnam surrenders to Communist North Vietnam. The Vietnam War—which killed over 58,000 American soldiers and wounded over 153,000 more—is over.</p>	<p>June 26: Harvey Comics' <i>Super Richie</i> #1 presents Richie Rich as a blue-and-red costumed super-hero with Cadbury as his sidekick. Undoubtedly due to objections from DC Comics, <i>Super Richie</i>'s costumes are changed to a green and yellow color scheme effective with issue #5.</p>

The Joker, Warlord, Wonder Woman TM and © DC Comics. X-Men TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Jaws TM and © Universal Studios.

In order to give Atlas immediate name-value in the comic book marketplace, Rovin sought to license some recognizable properties: Godzilla, Richard Matheson's apocalyptic vampire novel *I Am Legend*, television's *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, pulp heroes the Avenger and the Spider, even T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents, the spy-oriented super-hero team published by Tower Comics in the 1960s. But Martin Goodman wasn't interested in *Kolchak*, found the rights to Godzilla too expensive, and suggested an imitation of *I Am Legend* rather than a full-on adaptation. Goodman also bypassed T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents in order to license a different Tower Comics' property: the teen humor book *Tippy Teen* (Rovin 98).

After publishing the magazine-sized *Gothic Romances* (Dec. 1974), Seaboard released two more magazines (*Devilina* and *Weird Tales of the Macabre*) and the initial issues of its first three Atlas comic series, all with January 1975 cover dates. *Ironjaw* #1 boasted a Neal Adams cover, a Mike Fleisher script, and interior art by Mike Sekowsky and Jack Abel. Fleisher also wrote *The Grim Ghost* with art by Ernie Colón. Atlas's third title in its inaugural month, *Phoenix*, was written by editor Rovin and drawn by Sal Amendola.

The following month, Goodman made his big push to bump Marvel comics aside on the racks, as twelve more Atlas titles made their debut: the Hulk-derivative *Brute* by Fleisher and Sekowsky; the Spider-Man-evocative *De-*

structor by Archie Goodwin, Steve Ditko and Wally Wood; *Morlock 2001* by Fleisher and Al Milgrom; the *I Am Legend* knock-off *Planet of Vampires* by Larry Hama and Pat Broderick; Howard Chaykin's 1930s adventure *The Scorpion*; *Weird Suspense* by Fleisher and Pat Boyette; *Wulf the Barbarian* by Larry Hama and Klaus Janson; and *Vicki*, which reprinted late 1960s Samm Schwartz stories from Tower Comics' *Tippy Teen*. Stan Lee's younger brother, Larry Lieber, edited four Atlas anthology comics—*Police Action*, *Savage Combat Tales*, *Tales of Evil* and *Western Action*—as well as Seaboard's black-and-white magazine division which included the *Vampirella* knock-off *Devilina*; the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* imitation *Movie Monsters*; the self-explanatory *Gothic Romances*; the action-adventure *Thrilling Adventure Stories*; and *Weird Tales of the Macabre*, an anthology intended to compete with Warren's *Creepy* and *Eerie*, Skywald's *Nightmare*, *Psycho* and *Scream*, and Marvel's burgeoning black-and-white line.

Atlas's line ran the gamut of genres: super-hero, fantasy, teen humor, horror, science fiction, war, western, and adventure. For a short time the company seemed to be holding track on a bimonthly schedule for its books, but according to comics historian Robert Beerbohm, readers were having a hard time actually finding them. In California, Beerbohm says that Atlas/Seaboard put out "too many titles at once which caused the major wholesaler distributors to not place Atlas comics out on the racks." Owning several



Jim Starlin revamped Warlock as a nihilistic anti-hero who opposed the God-like Magus. Original art from *Strange Tales* #178 courtesy of Heritage Auctions. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

his own ideas via the means of an obscure comic character. Unlike those creators, however, Starlin was both writer and artist on this series.

In *Strange Tales* #178, Warlock saves the life of a space-faring woman fleeing from the Universal Church of Truth, which is led by a five-thousand-year-old being named the Magus. The Magus turns out to be one and the same being as Warlock. The story that follows is a bizarre twisting and turning time-travel tale of religion, ego, and the meaning of God, all played out in a cosmic scale that includes Thanos, the In-Betweener, and a set of 1000 Clowns that stand in as satirical avatars for Marvel staff and fellow creators. In sharp contrast to the way Adam was depicted in his initial run, Starlin portrays his protagonist not as a messiah but as a deeply flawed, at times nihilistic, fatalistic and even insane being. At one point in Starlin's saga, Warlock says, "My life has been a failure. I welcome its end." This was a hero for the 1970s, an era of doubts, an age of anti-heroism. In the end, Warlock sacrificed everything to thwart the plans of the Magus – whose dream was to bring about cosmic peace.

Conway's Clones

As Stan Lee toured college campuses, being paid for speaking engagements, he was consistently assaulted by the same question: "How could you let Gwen Stacy die?" (in 1973's *Amazing Spider-Man* #121). Offering words of assurance to a crowd at Penn State University, Lee promised that Gwen Stacy would return (Howe 137-138). As directed by Lee, Spider-Man scribe **Gerry Conway** plotted to bring back Gwen Stacy—in a story arc that would have major consequences for Marvel in subsequent decades.

In the pages of *Amazing Spider-Man*, readers began catching sights of Gwen Stacy—a glimpse here, an impression there—but since Spider-Man was in the middle of a fight with his villain *Mysterio*, who dealt with illusions, Spider-Man believed that his vision of Gwen was just another of *Mysterio*'s tricks. Gwen's first major reappearance came as a teaser on the cover of *Amazing Spider-Man* #144 (May 1975). Protruding from the cover's left edge is a leg clad in a familiar white high-heeled boot. Spider-Man gawks, "I m-must be seeing things!"

You can't be standing there! You're DEAD!" Turns out, Spidey was right: the real Gwen wasn't there. The girl he'd seen popping up around New York City was in fact Gwen Stacy's clone, manufactured by a villain who had been haunting him for the previous year: the Jackal.

In his alter-ego of Professor Miles Warren, the Jackal extracted cells from the students in his college biology class, which included Gwen Stacy and Peter Parker. The professor had fallen in love with Gwen; when she died, he couldn't take the grief of her passing. Warren remade Gwen

as a clone, one that retained all of Gwen's memories up until the sample was taken. Thus, the clone was in love with Peter but had no idea she had already died. In the finale to this multi-part epic, *Amazing Spider-Man* #149 (Oct. 1975), the Jackal clones Peter Parker as well, and has the two Spider-Men fight each other to stop a



Gil Kane and John Romita's cover to *Amazing Spider-Man* #144 teased readers about the return of Gwen Stacy. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.



Peter Parker reunites with Gwen Stacy... before learning she's only a clone of his former girlfriend. Pencils from *Amazing Spider-Man* #145 by Ross Andru with inks by Frank Giacoia and Dave Hunt. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

bomb from blowing up. In the end, the bomb does explode, killing the Jackal and one of the Spider-Men. Gwen decides that she doesn't want to pretend to love someone who doesn't love her back—as Peter is very committed to Mary Jane Watson at this point—and walks off to a waiting taxi, suitcase in hand.

The following issue provides the epilogue to the saga, as Peter wonders if he's a clone or if the clone died in the explosion at Shea Stadium. In a story written by Archie Goodwin, Peter regains a sense of who he is. He remembers that just as he was about to die, his thoughts went to Mary Jane, not Gwen. For a moment Peter wonders if he was the clone, but in the end he realizes that he experienced deep feelings that a clone taken from two-year-old cells couldn't have.

The reason why Conway didn't write that epilogue is because he had already departed Marvel Comics. Conway's frustration with Marvel dated back to August 1974 when Roy Thomas stepped down as Editor-in-Chief. Stan Lee had previously assured Conway that if Thomas ever resigned, Conway would be next in line to run Marvel Comics (Gustaveson 72). Much to Conway's disappointment, however, Lee forgot his promise and instead divided the Editor-in-Chief role between Len Wein and Marv Wolfman, two DC Comics imports who hadn't been working at Marvel as long as Conway had.

Rather than having the prominent status that he felt his experience and loyalty accorded him, Conway was now just another one of Marvel's writers. That fact made Conway very bitter, an emotional state that festered for months until a final straw was broken: a character Conway created in *Amazing Spider-Man*, the Punisher, was featured in *Marvel Preview* #2 (July 1975). Thomas, during his editorial tenure, had promised Conway the opportunity to edit a Punisher book if one ever came about. But now the black-and-white magazines were Marv Wolfman's territory, and Conway was only allowed to write the Punisher story. Angered by this development, Conway left Marvel Comics, first work-

ing freelance for Atlas/Seaboard and then becoming a staff writer and editor at DC Comics.

The Return of the King

Just as Conway exited Marvel's stage, another prominent creator returned to it. He was one of the most revered figures in the history of Marvel Comics: **Jack Kirby**. By the start of 1975, Kirby was not happy working for DC Comics. He was writing and drawing *OMAC*, *Kamandi*, *the Last Boy on Earth* and "The Losers" feature for *Our Fighting Forces*. Since his arrival at DC in 1970, Kirby created a variety of new titles... and then suffered their relatively quick cancellations: both *New Gods* and *Forever People* were stopped after their eleventh issues in 1972, *The Demon* lasted sixteen issues before its demise in 1973 and *Mister Miracle* was cancelled in 1974 after its eighteenth issue. The California-based Kirby wasn't getting along with DC's New York City editors and executive staff, and it was clear to Kirby that DC no longer wanted to use him as a writer/editor (Gartland). More and more, DC's editors, a mix of long-time veterans and young tyros, considered Kirby's writing as "stilted" (Howe 163). Beyond that, though, Kirby sensed that DC was in trouble. From Kirby's point of view, DC gave up too quickly on almost everything it put out, not letting the comics build an audience, and lowering the ax with the slightest poor sales report (Cronin #113).

Meanwhile, across town, Stan Lee had made it known that he never wanted Kirby to leave in the first place and that Marvel's door would remain open for his return. The only



The eleventh issue of Marvel's in-house fan magazine, *FOOM*, heralds the return of Jack Kirby to the House of Ideas. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.



1794

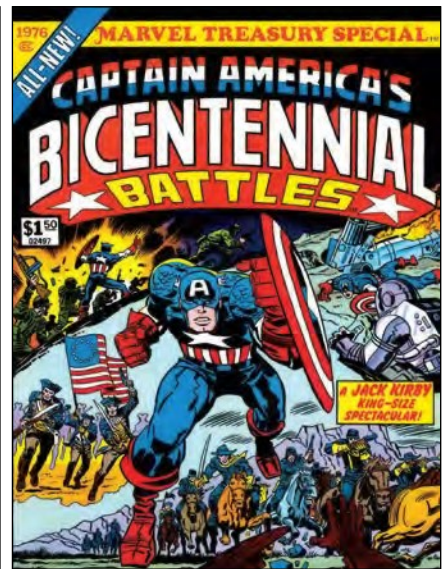
CHAPTER SEVEN

Bicentennial Fireworks

Bicentennial fever gripped the United States in 1976. Replicas of the Liberty Bell toured the country. Tall ships sailed into New York and Boston Harbors. The Statue of Liberty was officially designated a New York City Landmark. Items of Americana—which included George Washington’s copy of the Constitution, the original Louisiana Purchase, the dress Judy Garland wore in *The Wizard of Oz*, boxing trunks worn by heavyweight champ Joe Frazier, and Martin Luther King’s pulpit and robes—crisscrossed the continent via the “Freedom Train” (Wines). Red, white, and blue bathed everything from state license plates to beer cans to comic books.

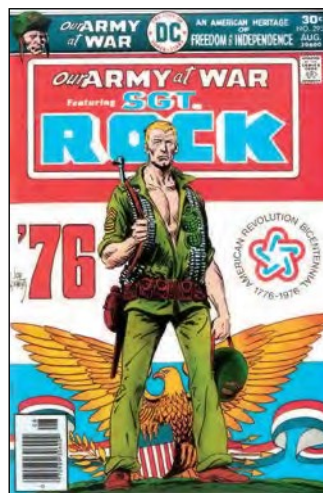
On all 33 of its July 1976 cover dated titles, DC Comics featured a cover banner that read, “DC Comics Salutes the Bicentennial.” A number appeared in every cover’s upper right corner. Readers who cut off the top of at least 25 different covers and sent the banners to DC by July 4, 1976 would receive “a metal Superman belt buckle! (in antiqued silver finish!).” Meanwhile, the “Superman Salutes the Bicentennial” tabloid (*Limited Collector’s Edition* #C-47, Aug. 1976) reproduced an old cover from *Superman* #14 (Jan. 1942) featuring an eagle perched in the crook of the Man of Steel’s arm with a star-spangled shield behind them. Inside, “6 titanic tales of heroic history—featuring George Washington and the men who made America great!” awaited. Ironically, despite Superman’s appearance on the cover, he wasn’t included in any stories inside the tabloid. Meanwhile, *Our Army at War* #295 (Aug. 1976) showed Sgt. Rock drawn by Joe Kubert posing proudly while the official seal of the bicentennial appeared next to him. That issue’s top banner proclaimed, “An American Heritage of Freedom and Independence.”

Marvel also got into the Bicentennial spirit. Its 1976 calendar was billed as “The Mighty Marvel Bicentennial Calendar” with Spider-Man, Hulk, and Captain America marching along, playing fife and drums and carrying an American flag, mimicking the style of Archibald MacNeal Willard’s portrait *The Spirit of ’76*. The calendar portrayed memorable moments from U.S. history with Marvel characters inserted right in the thick of things, like riding along with Washington crossing the Delaware and participating in the battle at Valley Forge. A special Bicentennial issue of *Captain America* came out—appropriately, it was issue #200 (Aug. 1976)—which threatened that “On the 200th anniversary of the United States, America will die!” unless Cap can stop the menace imperiling the country.



Like every other segment of America, the comic book industry got caught up in 1976's Bicentennial spirit. Captain America, Hulk, Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc. Sgt. Rock TM and © DC Comics. Archie TM and © Archie Comic Publications, Inc. Ronald McDonald TM and © McDonald's Corporation.

Cap also was featured in an all-new *Marvel Treasury Special* (Sept. 1976) by Jack Kirby titled "Captain America's Bicentennial Battles." Steve Rogers teamed up with Spider-Man as well for *Spidey Super Stories* #17 (July 1976), with the two of them posing in front of the Liberty Bell. Furthermore, Marvel offered superhero-themed Bicentennial T-shirts, one with Captain America standing in front of the Declaration of Independence, the other with the aforementioned fife and drum trinity.



Archie Comics celebrated "The Birth of a Nation" in *Life with Archie* #172 (Aug. 1976). In that story, the kids from Riverdale High travel to Washington, D.C. While viewing the Declaration of Independence, Archie finds himself whisked away from his friends and through time. Along the way, he takes part in the Boston Tea Party in 1773, rides along with Paul Revere, goes to Philadelphia to watch the signing of the Declaration of Independence, suffers the horrible winter in Valley Forge during the American Revolution, and witnesses the Battle of Yorktown.

Even McDonald's got into the Bicentennial comic book act, with *McDonaldland Comics* #101, a free giveaway available at the fast food chain. The issue featured "The 200 Year Trip" and was packed with historical trivia (Rasmussen).

Over at Charlton Comics, the final issue of *The Phantom* (#74, Jan. 1977), featured "The Phantom of 1776," written and drawn by Don Newton. In the course of helping a slave return to Africa, the Phantom of 1776 seeks out Ben Franklin on the eve of his signing the Declaration of Independence. Franklin arranges passage for them, but not before they get to witness the signing of the famous document hidden on the balcony of Independence Hall.

Charlton Comics Cease Circulation

But that wasn't the only final bit of news from **Charlton**. A major announcement came at the tail end of a listing of upcoming Charlton Comics in *The Comic Reader* #136 (Oct. 1976). The fanzine had already reported: "Due to what they term an 'industry-wide recession,' Charlton has cut its output by half—cancelling fourteen titles and four that haven't yet started." The news article went on to state that, like a fading relationship, some Charlton romance books would be published less frequently. Then came the *coup de grâce*, highlighted within a text box:

LATE ANNOUNCEMENT: After thirty years in the industry, Charlton had announced that they are abandoning their comics line entirely and that all employees have been layed [sic] off. We don't know how many of the already completed titles will make it to the stands, including those titles listed this issue. Our thanks to all of the kind people at Charlton who've helped us over the years and continued good luck. ("Charlton" 9)

Once the home of such original characters as Blue Beetle, Captain Atom, E-Man and The Question, Charlton now housed many Hanna-Barbera titles (*Betty and Barney Rubble*, *The Flintstones*, *Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm*, *Dino*, *The Great Gazoo*, *The Great Grape Ape*, *Hong Kong Phooey*,

TIMELINE: 1976

A compilation of the year's notable comic book history events alongside some of the year's most significant popular culture and historical events. (On sale dates are approximations.)

January: Archie, Charlton and DC Comics raise the cover price of their standard-size comic books to 30¢. Marvel and Harvey follow suit in June and July, respectively.

January 2: The 96 page tabloid-sized *Superman vs. The Amazing Spider-Man*—written by Gerry Conway, drawn by Ross Andru and Dick Giordano and co-published by DC and Marvel Comics—arrives on newsstands.



April 13: The United States Federal Reserve begins issuing \$2 bicentennial notes.



May 3: Four years after its cancellation, *Green Lantern* returns to DC's schedule. Issue #90 is written by Denny O'Neil and drawn by Mike Grell.



JANUARY

January 19: Carmine Infantino is let go as Publisher of DC Comics after nearly five years in the position. He is succeeded by children's magazine publisher Jenette Kahn.

January 14: *The Bionic Woman*—a *Six Million Dollar Man* spin-off starring Lindsay Wagner—debuts on the ABC television network.

FEBRUARY

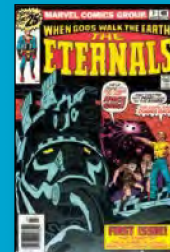
February 4: The Winter Olympics open in Innsbruck, Austria.

February: Mary Wolfman resigns as Marvel Comics' Editor-in-Chief. He is replaced by Gerry Conway, whose tenure lasts all of six weeks. Archie Goodwin becomes Marvel's new Editor-in-Chief after Conway's resignation.



APRIL

April 13: The first issue of *The Eternals*—created, written, and drawn by Jack Kirby—arrives on newsstands.



MAY

May: DC Comics hires longtime inker Vince Colletta to become its art director.



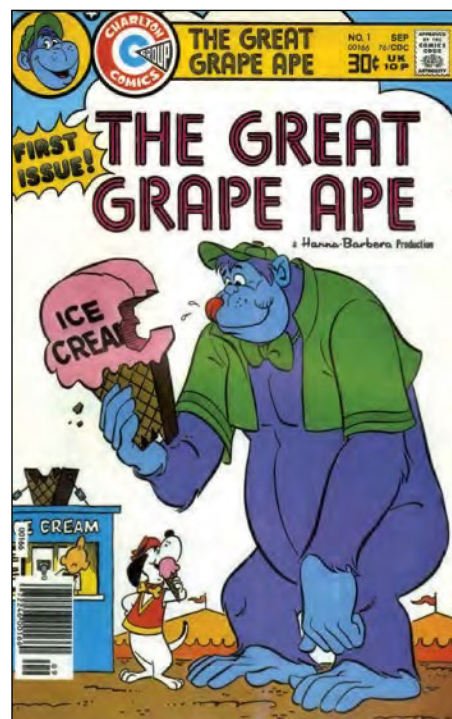
June 28: *Shazam!* #25—featuring both the "World's Mightiest Mortal" and the new television super-heroine Isis—is the first DC title to be re-branded a "DC TV Comic."

JUNE

Captain Marvel, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, Superman TM and © DC Comics. Phoenix, Spider-Man TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

Speed Buggy, *Scooby Doo*, *Where Are You?*, *Valley of the Dinosaurs*, and *Yogi Bear*). The company also published King Features newspaper comic strip adventures (*Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *Popeye*, and *Sarge Snorkel*), and TV series adaptations (*Emergency!*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and *Space: 1999*). The common denominator of all these series is that they were all licensed properties. Most of these were the first to get cancelled because "despite whatever tie-in possibilities the books may have had, licensed properties couldn't cut it saleswise" (Hildebrand 12). Some TV properties remained because of contractual obligations. They were joined by a dwindling collection of romance, war, and horror books.

The last month Charlton published comic books with any sort of regularity was October 1976 (cover date Jan. 1977). Ten different Charlton comics were released that month, compared to 17 the month before, and 22 the



The Great Grape Ape was one of many Hanna-Barbera properties that Charlton published in the 1970s. TM and © Hanna-Barbera Productions.

month before that. Meanwhile, Harvey released 15 titles with a January 1977 cover date, Archie had 18, Gold Key had 23, DC had 30, and Marvel had 48.

For its part, **Archie Comics** had several titles reach milestone issues with a 1976 cover-date: *Archie* #250 (Feb. 1976), *Jughead* #250 (March 1976), *Laugh* #300 (March 1976), *Everything's Archie* #50 (Aug. 1976), *Jughead's Jokes* #50 (Sept. 1976), *Archie Giant Series Magazine* #250 (Oct. 1976), and *Archie's Girls Betty and Veronica* #250 (Oct. 1976). The most historic story, though, may have been one in *Pep* #309 (Jan. 1976) wherein Chuck Clayton's girlfriend Nancy Woods debuted. Although *Josie and the Pussycats'* Valerie Smith had preceded her as the publisher's earliest recurring African American female, Nancy was the first to be featured in the Archie series itself.

Two **Gold Key** comics also reached milestones: *Daffy Duck* #100 (April

A Renewed Hope

In 1977, one of the biggest blockbusters in film history was released. Before it was given the subtitle of “Episode IV: A New Hope,” it was simply called *Star Wars*. In a pivotal scene, Luke Skywalker enters Princess Leia’s Death Star cell and declares, “I’m here to rescue you!” Luke just as easily could have been talking about **Marvel Comics**.

As the 1970s rolled relentlessly along, comic sales seemed to be tumbling toward the event horizon of a large black hole. At decade’s dawn, nearly every Marvel title averaged over 200,000 copies sold per issue. By 1977, only one Marvel title could boast that distinction: *Amazing Spider-Man*. The fabled “House of Ideas” was in a bad state, as Jim Shooter attests: “Marvel was a mess throughout the mid-1970s and during my two years as ‘associate editor,’ from the beginning of 1976 through the end of 1977. Almost every book was late. There were unscheduled reprints and fill-ins, and we still just plain missed issues here and there.... It seemed like the company as a whole was in a death spiral” (Veronese). In order to survive, Marvel needed the next big thing.

And then the next big thing found **Roy Thomas**.

Among his other assignments, Thomas wrote two licensed properties for Marvel: *Conan the Barbarian* and *The Savage Sword of Conan*. Based on the “success and quality” of those Conan titles, two men approached Thomas in early 1976, asking him to add a different licensed property to his workload. Their names were Ed Summer and Charles Lippincott. Thomas knew Summer as the owner of Supersnipe Comic Art Emporium, a comic store and gallery located just a few blocks from Thomas’s Manhattan apartment. A silent partner in the art gallery aspect of Supersnipe was a young filmmaker by the name of **George Lucas**. Several months earlier, Summer had introduced Thomas to Lucas and the two men traded compliments over dinner. Thomas had high regard for Lucas’s 1973 film *American Graffiti* while Lucas expressed his admiration for Thomas’s comic book work. Over the course of their conversation, Lucas mentioned “The Star Wars” a few times. The film was, according to Thomas, “planned to be an ambitious sf-type adventure ... already seen as a potential series of movies ... and that the name of the hero at that stage was Luke Starkiller ... although Luke Skywalker, as an alternative, might have been mentioned, as well” (Thomas 64).

Three months after that meeting, *Star Wars* (sans “The”) went before the lens, and Summer and Lippincott—the man in charge of merchandising and publicity for the new film—were convinced that Thomas had the chops to pull off a Marvel Comics adaptation that Lucas wanted for advance promotion of his film. Flattered, Thomas told the two men that he didn’t have the authority to secure such

CHAPTER EIGHT

a licensing agreement. Instead, they needed to contact Stan Lee. That's when Thomas learned that his boss had already turned down a proposal to adapt *Star Wars* in late 1975 because Lee wanted Marvel to focus on company-owned characters (Conan notwithstanding). Since Lee had already made a decision, Thomas told Summer and Lippincott that, unfortunately, the matter was settled (Thomas 65).

Undeterred, Lippincott began showing Thomas concept art for the movie. Flipping over Ralph McQuarrie's production paintings one by one, Lippincott laid out the plot of Luke Starkiller battling the Empire. Thomas found it all "vaguely interesting," but he was mostly listening to the presentation out of politeness. Then Lippincott revealed a picture of space smuggler Han Solo facing off against a horde of aliens in a Western-looking bar. Lippincott described it as "The Cantina Sequence," and at that moment, Thomas realized that *Star Wars* wasn't going to be a science-fiction film like *2001* or *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It was going to be the kind of adventurous "space opera" that Thomas used to enjoy in *Planet Comics* and *Planet Stories* magazines. Interrupting Lippincott's presentation, Thomas blurted out, "I'll do it" (Thomas 66).

Thomas met with Stan Lee and convinced his boss to reverse his earlier decision. Thomas's appeal was aided by the fact that the *Star Wars* licensing rights weren't going to cost Marvel a dime. As Thomas explains, "The *Star Wars* people didn't ask for any money for the adaptation.... it was free" (Veronese). George Lucas did make two requests, though. First, in order to maximize publicity, Marvel's first two *Star Wars* issues had to be on the newsstands before the film came out. Second, Lucas wanted artist **Howard Chaykin** to draw the comic. Lucas liked Chaykin's work on a 1973-74 three-issue run of DC's *Weird Worlds* (#8-#10) starring science-fiction swashbuckler Ironwolf. Thomas thought that "Howard's style would be a good fit with the energy implicit in the McQuarrie art" (Thomas 66). Getting Chaykin proved easy; he agreed to pencil and ink the series.

Getting Marvel to go along with Lucas's distribution plan, however, proved more difficult. Specifically, **Ed Shukin**, Marvel's Circulation Director, wasn't thrilled about the prospect of publishing a six issue adaptation of a movie that starred a cast of unknowns (except for Alec Guinness—a classically trained Shakespearean actor, then in his 60s, whom most of the comic-buying crowd wouldn't recognize). To minimize risk, Shukin wanted the *Star Wars* ad-



Above: Marvel Comics was likely going out of business... until the *Star Wars* comic book adaptation became an unexpected cash cow. Right: This Howard Chaykin-produced poster was given away at a 1976 San Diego Comic Con panel. *Star Wars* TM and © Lucasfilm Ltd.



aptation to run only one or two issues, as had been the case with several other film adaptations that Marvel undertook. That way, if the movie bombed, Marvel wouldn't be stuck producing more issues of a comic book that no one would want to buy. Thomas, however, insisted in order to do the adaptation "right," he needed six issues. Anything less than six issues meant that Thomas wouldn't do the project, forcing Lee and Shukin to find another writer. Since Lucas's people had approached Thomas to write the comic book in the first place, Shukin grudgingly relented (Thomas 67).

With both the screenplay and photo stills provided by Lucas's office, Thomas and Chaykin began producing the *Star Wars* comic book. Unfortunately, after completing the first issue, Chaykin had to bow out of full art chores because of deadline pressures, doing only layouts from issue #2 onward. Steve Leialoha was brought on to ink issues #2 through #5, while Rick Hoberg and Bill Wray provided finished penciling and inking on issue #6, with uncredited help from their friend Dave Stevens (Thomas 67-73). The artistic shuffling did not sit well with Lucas and Lippincott, but as Thomas states, "I told them there was nothing I could do about it. Howard was a freelancer, and I couldn't chain him to a drawing board" (Thomas 68).

In the meantime, Lippincott arranged for Thomas and Chaykin to join him for a panel at the July 1976 San Diego Comic-Con. It was one of the first times a movie studio uti-

Despite his difficulties, Gerber was given the opportunity to write an offbeat comic book that seemed tailor made for his talents. According to a 1977 Gallup poll, the rock band **Kiss** was America's most popular music act. The four band members wore make-up and costumes appropriate for a Halloween party, and their concerts were electrifying, explosion-filled extravaganzas. Kiss bassist and co-lead vocalist Gene Simmons, was a life-long comic book fan. In the 1960s he contributed to multiple fanzines—ranging from Jeff Gelb's *Men of Mystery* to his own *Cosmos Stiletto* and *Faun*—under the name Gene Klein, and his subsequent on-stage outfit was partly based on Marvel's Black Bolt character (Simmons 74). The band's manager approached Marvel about publishing a Kiss comic book, and after attending one of their concerts with a horrified Stan Lee, Steve Gerber agreed to write it (Howe 189).

Kiss, though, made several demands. For one, the band needed to be depicted not as mere musicians but as super-heroes. In addition, the comic book had to be the highest of quality products: a full color magazine printed on glossy paper. Gerber even petitioned for a cover logo that used metallic ink because he recognized that this publication had the potential to be a "respectable periodical," the kind that attracted advertisers who were willing to shell out top dollar for ad space (Howe 189-190).

Prior to the completion of the Kiss comic book, someone at Marvel decided that since Kiss stole Marvel's act by resembling super-heroes, Marvel might as well return the favor and publish a comic book that starred Kiss look-a-likes. That didn't sit well with Gerber, who had the band appear briefly in *Howard the Duck* #12 (May 1977) and #13 (June 1977) as mystical manifestations of insane asylum resident Winda Wester's fears. Gerber felt duty bound to inform Kiss about Marvel's plans. The band responded by threatening to sue Marvel if the Kiss comic book didn't get produced to their liking with Gerber at its helm. After matters got smoothed over, Gerber received an unprecedented promise from Marvel: royalty payments for his work on the Kiss comic book. Even with that significant concession, the experience left Gerber with a bitter taste in his mouth about how Marvel conducted business (Howe 191-192).

The cover to the Kiss comic book touted, "Printed in real KISS blood." That was no lie, as Gene Simmons explained:

As the Kiss comic book project moved along, someone came up with the idea of putting real blood in the ink. It wasn't me—maybe

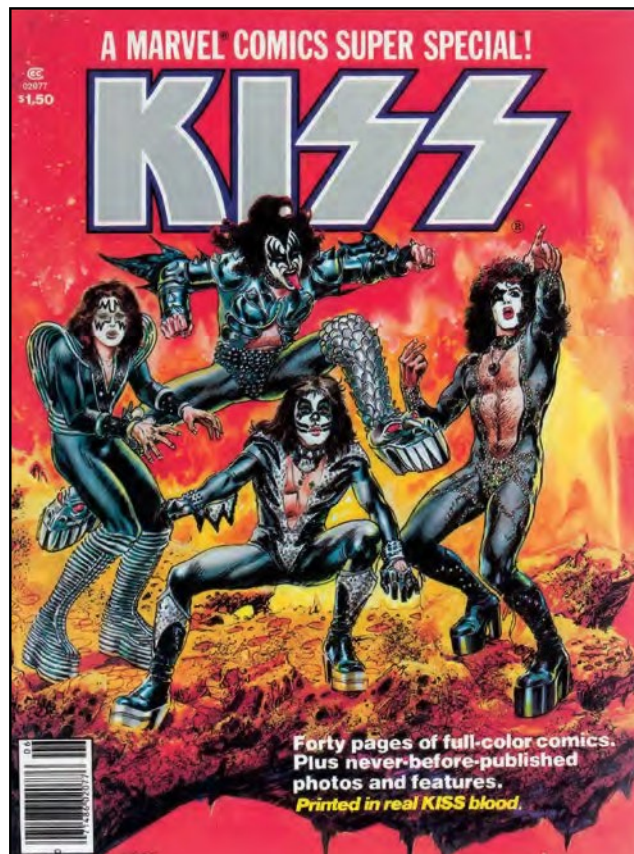
it was Bill [Aucion] (Kiss's manager) or Sean [Delaney] (sometime songwriter and choreographer for the band). We got into a DC3, one of those big prop planes, and flew to Buffalo to Marvel's printing plant, where they pour the ink and make comic books (Simmons 136-137).

The band members were photographed putting their vials of blood into the red ink. A smiling Stan Lee witnessed the act as did a notary public who certified the event. One unsubstantiated rumor claims that a printer mix-up caused Kiss' blood to end up in an issue of *Sports Illustrated* rather than the comic ("Blood Money").

Priced at \$1.50 (when nearly every other Marvel publication was selling for 30¢), **Marvel Super Special #1** (Sept. 1977) presented a 40 page story—drawn by Alan Weiss, Rich Buckler, and John and Sal Buscema—in which Kiss battle Marvel super-villains Mephisto and Doctor Doom. Guest stars included the Avengers, the Defenders, the Fantastic Four, and Spider-Man. The magazine sold over a half million copies. "For a while," Gerber said, "they had one drawer for Kiss mail, and another drawer for all the fan mail on all the other Marvel books" (Groth 38).

Kiss' management and public relations team was responsible for much of the success of the magazine, with the stunt with blood in the ink receiving considerable attention. Kiss' management also purchased a full-page color ad in popular rock music magazine *Circus* (Groth 38). Marvel, by contrast, had gotten cold feet once syndicated newspaper columnist Bob Greene condemned the project in an April 1977 write-up, sniffing that "the four punks are about to replace Superman and the others in your children's galaxy of comic book superheroes."

Fearful of the company image, Stan Lee and James Galton gave the Kiss issue minimal ad support in Marvel's own comics, something that was in line with Galton's view of their publishing output. Since his arrival, Marvel's president had been troubled by the fact that the company's Magazine Management division was still churning out crass confessionals and men's magazines. "I didn't think it was right for us to basically be in a kids' business and publish this type of material," Galton explained, "so I convinced [parent company] Cadence to sell off these magazines. I felt very strongly that we could take Marvel Comics and expand it into foreign licensing, publishing and merchandising, and get us on television. If we could do all that, it would more than supplant the



Steve Gerber ensured that the most popular rock band in the country got the best treatment that Marvel could provide. Cover art by Alan Weiss and Gray Morrow. TM and © respective copyright holder.



8
1
9
4

CHAPTER NINE

DC's Explosive Implosion

Following Archie Goodwin's resignation, **Jim Shooter** became Marvel Comics' seventh editor-in-chief. The first day of his tenure came on the first working day of 1978: January 3. At the age of 26, Shooter was responsible for the world's largest comic book publisher. He supervised Marvel's entire line of publications—over 40 ongoing titles, including the brand-new *Spider-Woman* and newly-merged *Power Man and Iron Fist*—with the support of two editors he hired: Roger Stern (assisted by Jim Salicrup) and Bob Hall (assisted by Jo Duffy). Rick Marschall was put in charge of Marvel's magazine line, and five writers continued to serve as their own editors: Steve Gerber, Archie Goodwin, Jack Kirby, Roy Thomas and Marv Wolfman.

Having been a Marvel Associate Editor since the beginning of 1976, Shooter was very familiar with the company's talent. After all, he was the person responsible for proofreading every book before it got sent to the printer. As such, he was the only member of Marvel's personnel team who tried (sometimes successfully, sometimes in vain) to get writers and artists to correct problems with their work. And now Jim Shooter was their boss. For many Marvel creators, that news went over like a lead balloon. If there was any hope amongst freelancers that Marvel could return to the days of unrestrained—and unsupervised—creative freedom, that hope was thoroughly dashed by the news of Shooter's promotion.

In fact, some creators assumed their Marvel days were over. Writer Bill Mantlo had pretty much ignored Shooter's requests to revise his scripts when Shooter was Marvel's Associate Editor. Back then, Shooter didn't have the authority to either force Mantlo to make revisions or have Mantlo fired. Now he did. Well aware of what Shooter thought of his writing, Mantlo asked the new editor-in-chief if he should look for employment elsewhere. Shooter assured Mantlo that he could continue writing for Marvel, but Shooter wanted to see improvement in the quality of Mantlo's scripts. In Shooter's words, he demanded no more hack work (Shooter, "ROM Comments and Answers").

Marv Wolfman, on the other hand, just wanted to know what changes Shooter had in store. Most significantly, Wolfman wanted to know if Shooter had any designs on eliminating the writer/editor position. By this point, Shooter had made clear what he thought of Marvel allowing writers to serve as their own editors: he didn't like

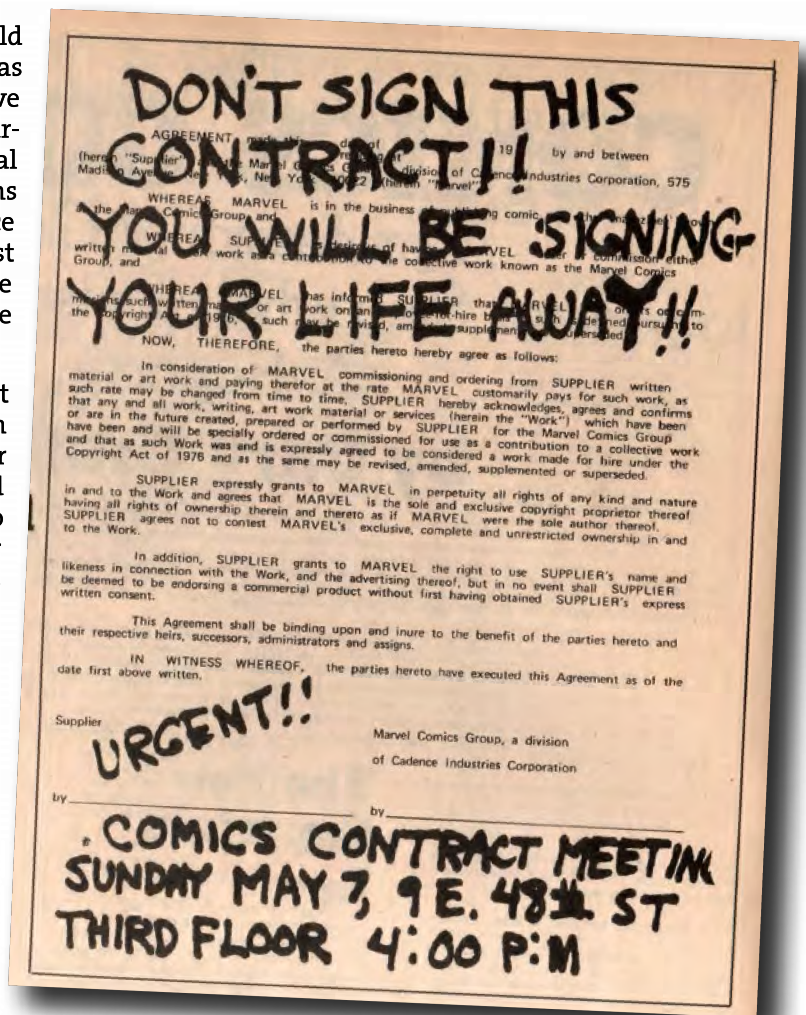
it, he didn't understand it, and he didn't think it should continue. Letting writers edit their own work made as much sense to Shooter as letting baseball pitchers serve as their own umpires. Shooter's philosophy was that Marvel's writers needed editors who would act as impartial intermediaries between the creators' singular visions and Marvel's business needs. Editors could distance themselves from a story, pinpoint its flaws and request the writer to address those flaws. The writers who were editing their own work, however, lacked a dispassionate perspective.

Because Shooter had been very vocal about how he felt about the writer/editor position, the morning after Stan Lee announced at a Marvel Christmas party that Shooter was being promoted to editor-in-chief, Wolfman called Shooter at home and asked, "What are you going to do?" (Shooter, "The Secret Origin of Jim Shooter, Editor in Chief—Part 2"). Shooter, though, dodged Wolfman's question by claiming he didn't know how he was going to address the writer/editor position. Besides, at that point he hadn't even assumed the reins from Archie Goodwin yet.

Once Shooter *did* begin serving as Marvel's editor-in-chief, he learned he had to handle more urgent problems than the writer/editor conundrum. For one, there was rampant corruption going on within Marvel's hallowed halls. Shooter discovered a receptionist had been stealing money that readers had mailed to Marvel for comic book subscriptions. He also learned that Marvel's former Production Manager, the late John Verpoorten, had performed an accounting "lapping" scheme by letting creators get paid in advance and then covering up those payments when the creators didn't follow through on their assignments (Shooter, "Rooting Out Corruption at Marvel—Part Three").

Another urgent issue for Shooter to face was the implementation of new copyright laws. In 1976 the United States Congress passed legislation that, among other things, stipulated that in order for creative work to be considered "work made for hire" (that is, work that the creator wouldn't own), the creator of that work must agree in writing to relinquish the copyright. Previously, comic book publishers would stamp the back of their checks with work-made-for-hire verbiage. When creators signed the checks that paid them for their work, they were also legally conceding that their work belonged to the publishers. But that procedure no longer sufficed, thanks to the new legislation. As Shooter's luck would have it, the new copyright laws went into effect in 1978. Marvel's Business Affairs department was charging him with making sure every freelancer signed a document that reinforced Marvel as the exclusive copyright holder of all the work being created for Marvel (Shooter, "The Secret Origin of Jim Shooter, Editor in Chief—Part 3").

Marvel's outside counsel drafted a four page legal agreement which Shooter whittled down to a more comprehensible single page. He then distributed that contract to everyone who worked for Marvel. The freelancer reaction to the document ranged from resigned acceptance to righteous outrage. Most seemed to recognize that if they



Neal Adams used Marvel's new Work-For-Hire contract to galvanize his fellow comic book creators.

wanted to continue working for Marvel Comics, they had no choice but to agree to the work terms set out in the document. (Leaving Marvel for DC Comics wouldn't have been a remedy since DC had already incorporated the new copyright laws into its payment system.) One staff member, David Anthony Kraft, however, quit writing *The Defenders* rather than sign the agreement (Howe 212).

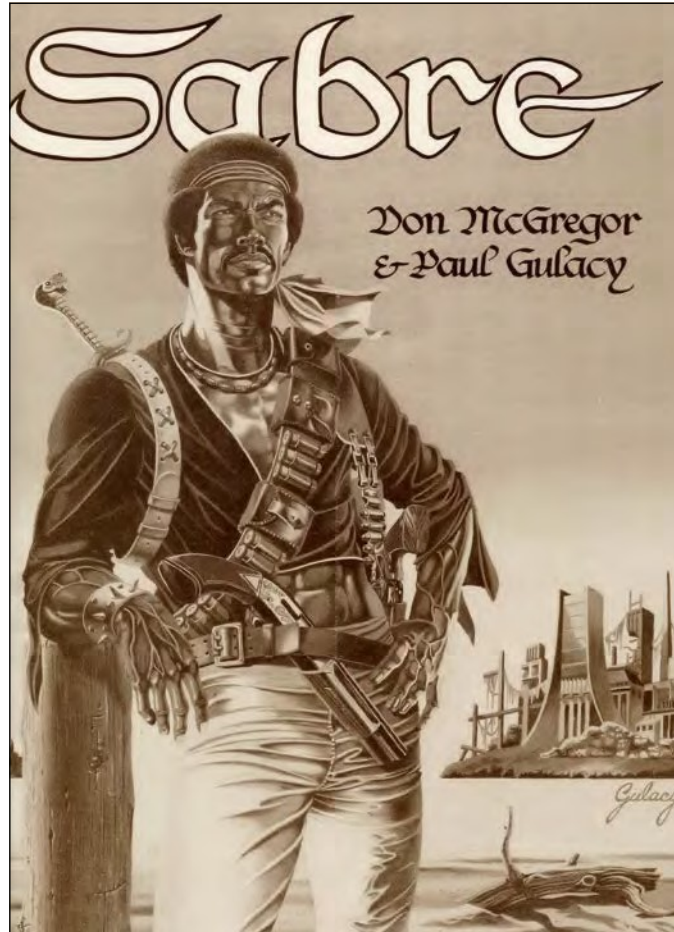
And then there was the prominent creator who objected to Marvel's document so vehemently that he felt obligated to take action. He was so sick of how comic book publishers treated their creators that he took a black marker and scrawled a call-to-arms onto Marvel's new work-made-for-hire agreement: "Don't Sign This Contract! You Will Be Signing Your Life Away! Urgent! Comics Contract Meeting, Sunday May 7, 9 E. 48th St. Third Floor 4:00PM." That creator then made photocopies of his marked-up agreement and posted those copies outside Marvel's offices—in the elevators, in the lobby, on the doors—for everyone to see. In that way, Neal Adams attempted to rally the comic book creative community into a unified labor force that sought to reverse the relationship between comic book publishers and their creators. Adams wanted the artists and writers to dictate work terms to their employers through a collective similar to those of other creative industries, like the Screen Actors Guild or the Newspaper Guild. He called it the **Comic Book Creators Guild**.

Within a few years, *Elfquest's* circulation climbed from 10,000 to 100,000 (Sanderson). Females comprised half the book's readership, nearly unheard of for a fantasy adventure comic book. Beyond that, *Elfquest* branched into other forms of merchandise including prose novelizations, clothing, and role playing games. Unquestionably, *Elfquest* is one of the most successful self-published properties in comic book history. In Wendy Pini's own words, "*Elfquest* happened at the right place and the right time. It took off like wildfire. It was lightning in a bottle" (Beschizza 123). And without the Direct Market, *Elfquest* might never have been published.

At the same time that the Pinis were developing *Elfquest*, brothers **Jan and Dean Mullaney** founded a comic book company in Staten Island, New York. **Eclipse Enterprises** (also known as Eclipse Comics) not only sought to market itself exclusively to the Direct Market, it also guaranteed more rights and privileges to the professionals who were producing their graphic novels. The Mullaney's provided sales royalties and allowed creators to own the properties they created.

Dean Mullaney was a good friend—and avid fan—of former Marvel Comics writer **Don McGregor**. Unaware of Mullaney's comic publishing aspirations, McGregor had been working on ideas outside of his work on Marvel's Killraven and Black Panther. He developed two personal projects: one, *Ragamuffins*, dealt with two lower middle class American boys growing up in the 1950s while the other, *Detectives, Inc.*, featured a pair of private detectives—one black, one white—operating in New York City. McGregor and some friends had produced a *Detectives Inc.* fanzine in 1969, and also made a short film featuring the lead characters in the early 1970s. McGregor eventually recognized, though, that through his Marvel work, he had gained the reputation of being a super-hero/fantasy writer. Whatever new work he would introduce to the comic book marketplace would have to appeal to his existing fanbase, and those fans would want McGregor to produce something akin to Black Panther or Killraven (Sacks). It would have to be a book that starred—in McGregor's own words—"a strong heroic character" (Gough). Since neither *Ragamuffins* nor *Detectives, Inc.* featured that kind of hero, McGregor shelved them both for the time being.

Then one day, Dean Mullaney visited McGregor. Still ignorant to the fact that Mullaney was launching a comic book company, McGregor showed him a comic strip concept that he previously pitched to Marvel. It included some design work by artist **Paul Gulacy**. McGregor called that concept "Sabre." In the year 2020 Sabre is a self-reliant, swash-buckling, African-American "romantic idealist." He stands opposed to the Overseer, who has turned the world into a police state in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. Joining Sabre in his fight against oppression is his test tube-created lover, Melissa Siren. Indeed, the story's driving dynamic is neither action nor politics but the passion Sabre and Melissa have for each other.



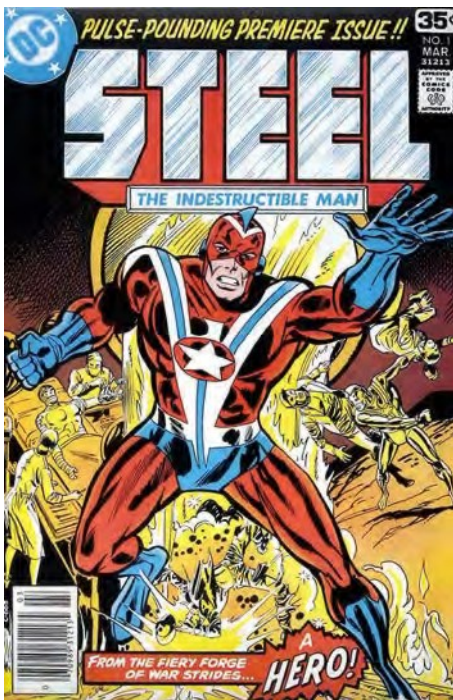
Eclipse's first publication was Sabre, a black-and-white graphic novel by Don McGregor and Paul Gulacy. Sabre TM and © Don McGregor.

Unfortunately, as he explained to Mullaney, McGregor had withdrawn the pitch from Marvel because he realized it just wouldn't work as a comic strip. Days after seeing the presentation, Mullaney contacted McGregor, informed him about his plans for Eclipse Enterprises and then asked him if Eclipse could be *Sabre's* publisher. Once McGregor accepted that Mullaney wasn't pulling his leg, he asked for assurances that he would get to keep all the copyrights to the material he produced and have complete creative control over his work. Without hesitation, Mullaney gave him those assurances. And then McGregor and Gulacy got to work on turning *Sabre* into a full-fledged comic book (Gough).

In August 1978, Eclipse released its first publication: the 38 page, black-and-white *Sabre: Slow Fade of an Endangered Species*. The "graphic album" (as McGregor liked to call it) seamlessly integrates

McGregor's trademark poetic verbosity and Gulacy's beautifully sharp artwork. The book's plot puts Sabre into an extended Old West-style showdown against the mercenary Blackstar Blood in an abandoned Disneyland-like amusement park. Along the way to that showdown, Sabre and Melissa pontificate on such subjects as freedom and heroism. And then they make love. No doubt, *Sabre* offered provocative material intended for an adult reader, and McGregor took full advantage of his freedom from both the corporate and Comics Code censors.

Despite its six dollar retail cost, *Sabre* had such strong Direct Market re-orders that the Mullaney's ordered a second print run for a Feb. 1979 release. Eclipse Enterprises was off and running, soon publishing comics material by fan-



The DC Explosion was preceded by three new titles—Steel: The Indestructible Man, Doorway to Nightmare and Firestorm. Their respective cover artists were Don Heck & Al Milgrom, Michael Kaluta, and Al Milgrom. TM and © DC Comics.

line-wide initiative. To coincide with the June premiere of *Superman: The Movie*, every DC standard title would have its story page count increased from 17 to 25 (while the total page count would increase from 36 pages—counting covers—to 44). At the same time, cover prices would increase from 35¢ to 50¢. DC promoted this as “**The DC Explosion**.” As Kahn explained in her June 1978 “Publishorial,” the Explosion was intended to remedy a few ills. First, it would reverse the industry trend of providing less value for the readers’ money. Since 1970, the number of new story pages in a standard comic book had steadily decreased from 25 to 17, even though the cover price had increased from 15¢ to 35¢. Consumers were being charged more money for less content. If the cost of a comic book was going to be raised further (and the industry was indeed heading toward the 40¢ price point), Kahn felt readers needed to be properly compensated. Second, Kahn believed that more story pages meant a creative team would now have the necessary space to produce better stories with “fully-developed sub-plots and characterization.” Titles that didn’t offer 25 page stories would have back-up features that spotlighted such fan-favorite characters as Atom and Hawkman (in *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics*, respectively). DC would also offer

several titles—*Battle Classics*, *Demand Classics*, *Dynamic Classics*, and *Western Classics*—that would reprint acclaimed stories from the past (like Jim Shooter’s Legion of Super-Heroes stories and Archie Goodwin and Walt Simonson’s Manhunter series). Finally, Kahn hoped—much like Carmine Infantino hoped in 1971 when he increased the cost of DC’s comics from 15¢ to 25¢—that DC’s higher price point would improve distribution by encouraging more newsstand dealers to carry DC’s titles. (Retailers would earn more money through the sale of a DC title than through the sale of a cheaper comic book.)

To clear the deck for the Explosion, DC cancelled several of its lowest-selling titles, among them *Freedom Fighters*, *Karate Kid* and *Shazam!*. They were to be replaced with promised new titles, like ones starring Swamp Thing and a new character named Vixen. To make its readers aware of what was in store for them, DC produced numerous house ads promoting the “DC Explosion”, each ad presenting different new forthcoming features. Several last-minute changes were made, however. When the Superman movie release got pushed back to December, DC postponed various tie-ins, such as a reprint of *Superman* #1 and a three part “World of Krypton” story that would have appeared in *Showcase* (Wells 130).

What didn’t get pushed back was the Explosion itself. As scheduled, it launched in June with 26 titles along with two Dollar Comics (including the recently revamped *Adventure Comics* which now hosted six different features: Flash, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Deadman, Elongated Man and the New Gods). Unquestionably, DC had very high hopes that the Explosion would be a resounding success, one that would serve as a springboard for further expansion of the line.

Not everyone, though, shared DC’s optimism. For instance, on the eve of the Explosion’s launch, *The Comics Journal*’s Kim Thompson asked Jim Shooter if Marvel also planned on increasing its comic books to 25 pages for 50¢. Shooter said Marvel had no intentions of following DC’s lead. Quite the contrary, Shooter expressed serious qualms about the reasoning behind DC’s Explosion: “I don’t know why [DC] did that. I can’t figure that out at all. I think that that’s a bad move... I don’t think it’s going to work out the way they have planned it” (Thompson 44).

Shooter’s sentiment would prove prophetic. In very short time the DC Explosion became one of the most notorious events in the history of DC Comics.

DC Comics Cancellation List

Titles Cancelled in 1977:

- DC Special*
- DC Super-Stars*
- Hercules Unbound*
- Isis*
- Plastic Man*
- Ragman*
- Richard Dragon, Kung Fu Fighter*
- Starfire*
- Super-Team Family*
- Teen Titans*
- Young Love*
- Welcome Back, Kotter*

Titles Cancelled in 1978 Before Cover Price Increase:

- Aquaman*
- Challengers of the Unknown*
- Claw the Unconquered*
- Freedom Fighters*
- Karate Kid*
- Metal Men*
- Mister Miracle*
- New Gods*
- Secret Society of Super-Villains*
- Shade, The Changing Man*
- Shazam!*

Titles Cancelled in 1978 After Implosion:

- All-New/Limited Collectors' Edition*
- All-Star Comics*
- Army at War*
- Batman Family*
- Battle Classics*
- Black Lightning*
- Doorway to Nightmare*
- Dynamic Classics*
- Firestorm*
- Kamandi, The Last Boy on Earth*
- House of Secrets*
- Our Fighting Forces*
- Secrets of Haunted House*
- Showcase*
- Star Hunters*
- Steel: The Indestructible Man*
- Witching Hour*

Titles Cancelled Before Publication:

- Demand Classics*
- Deserter*
- Starslayer*
- Strange Adventures*
- Swamp Thing*
- Western Classics*
- Vixen*

DC Comics Implodes

On June 22, 1978, DC Comics' parent company Warner Communications handed down a drastic order: effective immediately, nearly half of DC's line was cancelled or indefinitely postponed. That meant a mere three weeks after it began, the DC Explosion was over. In fact, the event would forever be known by a different name, based on a headline that ran in *The Comics Journal* #41: "**The DC Implosion.**"

DC Comics spokesman Mike Gold informed the comics fan press that DC was "renovating" its distribution system because Warner's executives felt effective newsstand sales were being hindered by a comic book glut: "There are way too many titles coming out for too few people. They can't get the newsstand exposure" ("The DC Implosion" 5). Going forward, DC's new strategy would be to improve newsstand sell-through rates by publishing fewer comics and reducing print runs. Beginning with comic books on sale in September (cover date December), DC was dropping its price point to 40¢ and its story page count back to 17.

The unspoken reality was that Warner's executives weren't happy with DC's sales. It's not that they weren't happy with how the DC Explosion was selling. It would have been impossible to ascertain how the Explosion was selling a mere three weeks after its roll out. Instead, Warner's executives were alarmed by the downward sales trend from earlier in the year, during the winter. A key factor for the poor sales in those months was the blizzards that wreaked havoc with the distribution of *all* newsstand products, not just comic books. Warner's brass, though, didn't care much about the reasons for the downturn. They just felt the financial losses warranted decisive action.

All told, DC eliminated 24 titles from its lineup: 17 existing titles and 7 titles that were scheduled to be released later in the year. One of the latter was *Starslayer*, a series Mike Grell created about a Celtic warrior from the age of the Roman Empire who gets transported into the far future. One of the former was a new comic book that had only reached its fifth issue by the time of its cancellation: **Firestorm**. Co-created by **Gerry Conway** and artist **Al Milgrom**, Firestorm was a unique super-hero in that he had an integrated dual identity. An explosion in a nuclear power plant fuses high school student Ronnie Raymond and physicist Professor Martin Stein. They become a "nuclear man," able to rearrange the atomic structure of inanimate objects. In other words, Firestorm can turn automobiles into water or brick walls into thin air. Because Stein was unconscious at the time of the explosion, Ronnie dominates Firestorm's persona, in control of all decisions and actions. Stein operates as a background voice of reason and advice (which Ronnie often ignores, much to Stein's chagrin). When Firestorm separates into his two civilian identities, Stein is unable to remember any super-heroic exploits.

For Conway, *Firestorm* was practically a return to his days writing *Amazing Spider-Man* in that both super-hero titles featured a young male protagonist with an expansive supporting cast. But while Conway's Spider-Man run was marked with tragic angst (like the death of Gwen Stacy), his *Firestorm* stories presented more lighthearted adven-



1979

CHAPTER TEN

Post-Impllosion Malaise

1979 was a watershed year for comics. On the heels of 1978's "DC Implosion," professionals openly debated the state of the industry with the consensus being that comics were on their last legs. That fatalism even spread to the people selling comic books. Pioneering comics retailer Chuck Rozanski told Marvel Comics President Jim Galton in 1979, "Given the trends that I'm currently seeing as a retailer, I have grave doubts as to whether the comics industry is going to survive more than a couple more years. What I really want is for you to convince me that Marvel isn't about to go out of business" (Rozanski, "Chuck Goes to New York").

At the end of a decade that brought a steady stream of new creators to an ever-increasing number of titles, the DC Implosion stopped that boom with a resounding thud. Truth be told, though, the crash was inevitable, as an ever-increasing number of comics titles were chasing an ever-decreasing amount of comics sales.

Marvel focused mainly on publishing licensed comics that had built-in audiences while Galton and Stan Lee pushed to invest in a permanent partnership with the DePatie-Freleng animation studio as a way to diversify the company. At other publishers, staff morale was abysmal. Creators didn't know how long they would be able to continue to work in the medium they loved. In an industry that had essentially been taken over by fans, that pessimism hit especially hard.

The events in the comics industry paralleled depressing days in America. Near the end of 1979, the country's inflation rate exceeded 13%, one of the highest rates in the nation's history. Homes sold—if they sold at all—at double-digit mortgage rates, and the United States was in a deep financial recession. That meant that luxuries had to be cut in American households. Even at 40¢, comics were priced too high to sustain readership. Besides, readers received 22 pages of comics for their 15¢ in 1970, but they only received 17 pages of story for over two-and-a-half times that price in 1979.

That type of price hike affected many industries in America. Gasoline cost 36¢ per gallon in 1970 and 86¢ per gallon in 1979. The average new home price rose from \$26,600 to \$71,800. A first-class stamp rose from 6¢ to 15¢. However, average American household income only doubled in that era, meaning that wages rose slower than inflation. In light of all the challenges America was facing that year, President Jimmy Carter made a televised speech to the country

on July 15 in which he expressed existential despair about the future of the country. He stated that the nation's problems stemmed from a deep "fundamental threat to American democracy." The crisis had led to domestic turmoil and "the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation." This became known as the "Malaise Speech."

Nobody could expect that the worst was yet to come: on November 4, 1979, a group of revolutionaries in Iran, furious at America's imperialistic support for the despotic Shah and under orders from the Islamist Ayatollah, seized hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran. As the holiday season progressed, the hostage crisis became an American obsession as well as a symbol of both Jimmy Carter's weakness and the loss of American influence throughout the world. Oddly, the comics industry had a small part in resolving one aspect of the hostage crisis.

Nine days after the hostage crisis began, former California Governor Ronald Reagan announced his intention to run for President. Upon his election in 1980, he would become one of the most popular and controversial American Presidents. Meanwhile, in New York **Jim Shooter** continued to consolidate his plans for the growth of Marvel Comics. Though he would achieve his greatest success in the 1980s, the roots of Shooter's triumph began with a handful of fan-acclaimed runs in 1979.

A Truly Great New Artist Explodes Like a Bombshell

On the splash page of *Daredevil* #158 (May 1979), a typically breathless bit of Marvel hype greeted the reader: "From time to time a truly great new artist will explode upon the Marvel scene like a bombshell! Ramblin' Roger McKenzie, Kinky Klaus Janson, Joe Rosen, Geo. Roussos, Amiable Al Milgrom & Jim (Trouble) Shooter confidently predict newcomer – lanky **Frank Miller** is just such an artist!" And while many readers likely believed that caption was just typical Marvel bombast, it also proved prophetic.

The fifth of seven kids raised in Montpelier, Vermont, Miller was a lifelong comics fan. He had a letter published in the pages of *The Cat* #3 (April 1973), and he wrote and drew stories for various fanzines and APAs during his high school years in the mid-1970s. Wanting to become a professional comic book artist, Miller showed his work to Neal Adams... and the legendary creator let the novice know everything he was doing wrong. Miller accepted the feedback and worked to improve his artistry. Miller kept bringing his new samples to Adams, and Adams kept offering more criticism. Finally, Miller decided he needed to go ahead and commit himself to becoming a professional. With little money, he moved to New York City and in his own words, "started making a nuisance of myself at the comic book publishers" (Decker 72).

His first professional work came in 1978 with stories in Gold Key's *Twilight Zone* and DC's *Weird War Tales*. When Miller called on Mar-



Artist Frank Miller's big break came when he was assigned to *Daredevil*, starting with issue #158. TM and © Marvel Characters, Inc.

vel, editor-in-chief Jim Shooter recognized that the inexperienced artist truly had talent. Miller's first Marvel work appeared in *John Carter, Warlord of Mars* #18 (Nov. 1978) and then, fortuitously, he was assigned to draw *Spectacular Spider-Man* #27 and #28 (Feb.-March 1979), a two-part storyline guest-starring Daredevil.

Before long, Frank Miller got his big break. Gene Colan had become the new regular penciller on *Daredevil*, starting with issue #153 (July 1978). The artist had produced a definitive *Daredevil* run from 1966 to 1973, but his second tenure on the title proved far less distinguished. After drawing only four issues, Colan begged off the book. Miller saw a golden opportunity to attach himself to a series that he could mold into his interests, specifically crime noir. He explained, "When Gene Colan left *Daredevil*, I realized it was my secret to do crime comics with a superhero in them. And so I lobbied for the title" (Lovece).

Letting Miller take over *Daredevil* was a risk because the artist had no history of handling an on-going assignment, not even one that was published bi-monthly like *Daredevil* was at the time. But Shooter was impressed enough with Miller's work that he wanted to give him a chance to turn around a struggling title, "I got Frank Miller on *Daredevil*



Photo of Frank Miller at the 1982 San Diego Comic Con. Courtesy of Alan Light.